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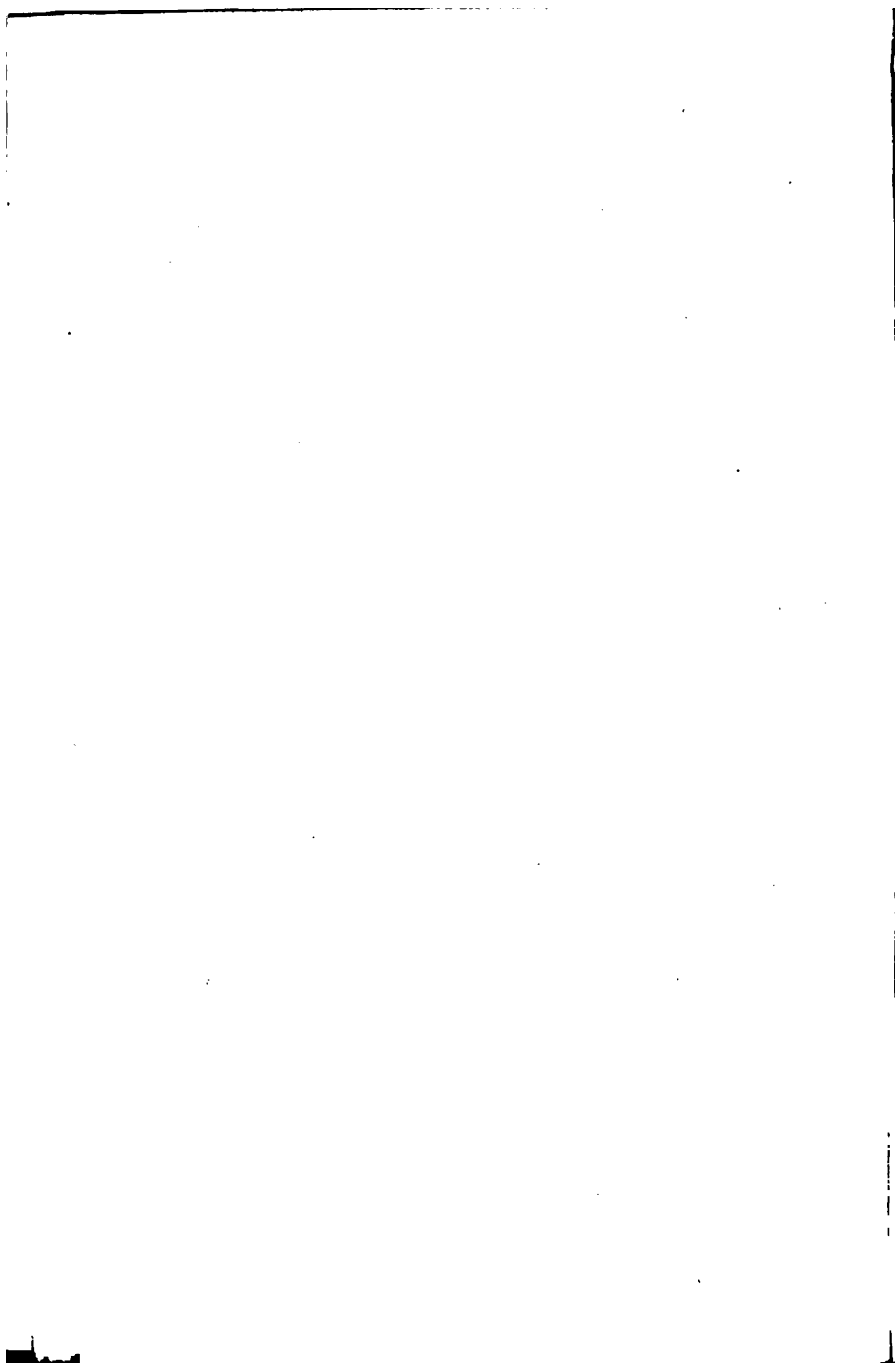
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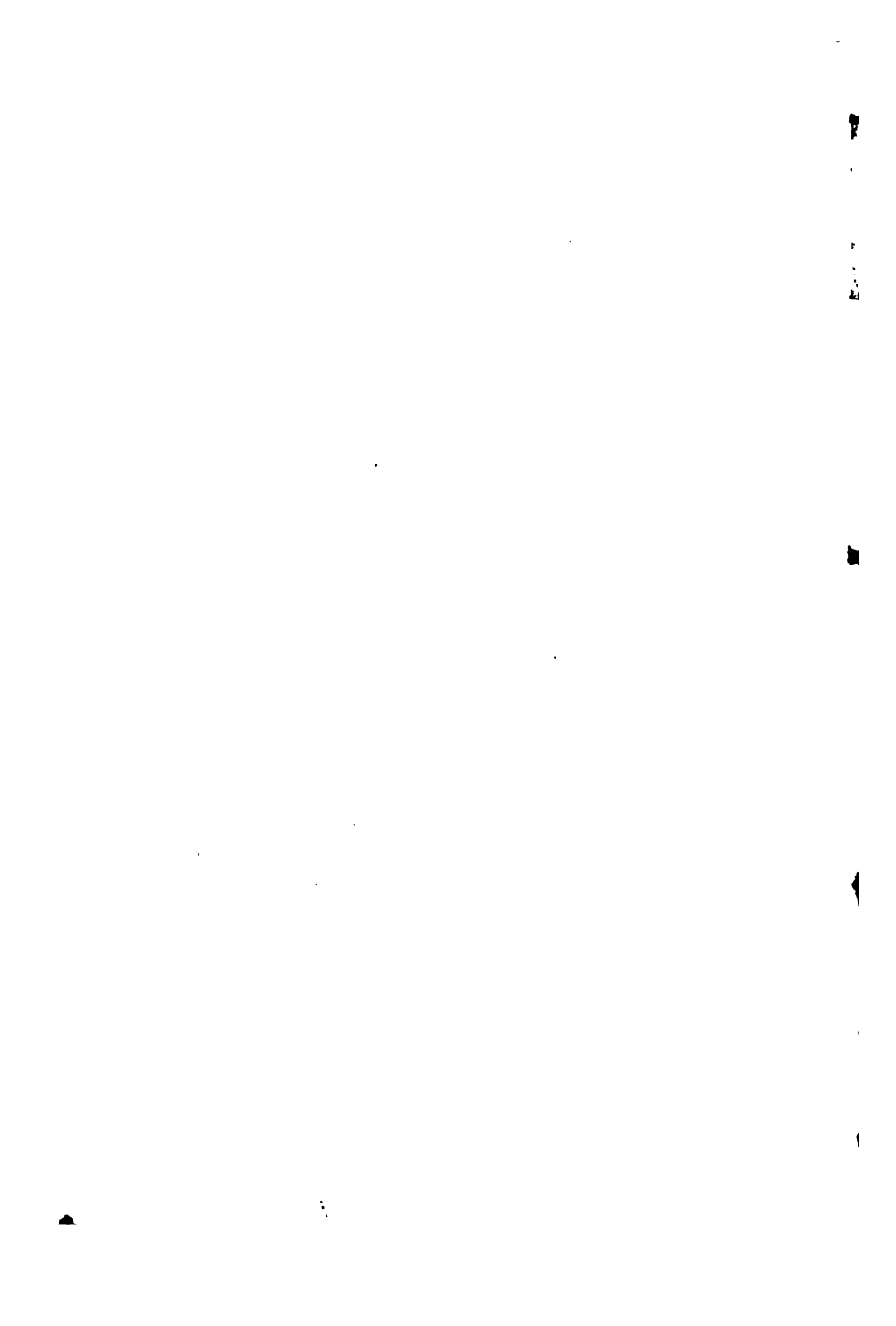








STRAY SHEEP.



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BY

ANNIE THOMAS,
(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP)

AUTHOR OF "SIR VICTOR'S CHOICE," "DENNIS DONNE,"
"MRS. CARDIGAN," ETC.

THREE VOLUMES.

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A WAY-SIDE CROSS.

“ I WAS able to speak at last ; and then I told him that until that minute I had not believed the world contained such another devil as my husband. Everything died in me as I spoke—hope, love, youth—everything. Only life was left to me, and what a legacy it has been !

“ You’re a woman, and you can perhaps imagine what an agony I went through in finding myself blasted and betrayed in this way. I had to go back to Exeter with him, because I knew of no other means of getting back to the city from that place. When the

blow had fallen on me, I found that 'consulting a lawyer' had been a fabrication of his own brain. He had done nothing of the kind. He had lied to me from beginning to end.

"I was stunned at first, and so I had let him go on offering me his false vows of love, and pleading that I should become what he wanted to make me, his mistress only, without interruption. But when I came to my senses again, I soon made him understand that I had not been more completely deceived in him than he was in me. Then he had the meanness to tell me that the world and my family would never believe me to be a pure woman again—tried to make me reckless in that way. But I hated him now as much as I had loved him before; and so, although I thought he spoke the truth in saying that my own family would never believe me pure again, that consideration didn't drive me to him.

"He went away at last—went abroad at once, I believe, and then I conceived the

plan of making all those who might feel me a dishonour to them, if I lived, think that I was dead. So I wrote to my mother again, telling her not to credit the evil reports of me—telling her that I was ill, broken-hearted, crushed—all of which was true; and adding that, if she did not hear from me within a month, to conclude that I was dead. I travelled away to the north of England to post that letter, in order not to give them any clue. And then I left England and went to Boulogne for a time; got a situation in a shop there until I had saved money enough to have that cross you found sculptured. When that was done I went back and got a stonemason in Exeter to go out to that lane with me, and plant it over the spot that was the grave of my hopes and love and faith.

“That is the story of the cross,” she added abruptly; and I rose, feeling that I had no excuse for intruding on her any longer.

“That is all I have to tell you, unless

you care to hear how I have lived since," she resumed.

I told her that I did very much care to hear how she had lived, and why she had not restored herself to her family, if she had time to tell me.

"Yes—I have time for that. Well, the reason I have not made myself known to my family is quickly disposed of. I have reason to believe that the paragraph Bertram Lennox showed to me was very little seen; consequently, that the report was not very widely circulated."

She hesitated for a moment, and then she added: "Do you know what I *do* think, Mrs. —; that he put it in himself, just to work upon me?"

"As for my life since then, that has been stupid and humdrum enough. When I had put that cross up, my life and all its interests seemed to be over; but still I knew that I must go on living my time; and, as I had no money, I knew I must go on working. It is not a very difficult matter for a woman

to find work to do, if she wants to do it—is it? I could get a situation as a show-girl in one of the big shops any day; but I wanted more excitement—so I got an engagement at a theatre, and, though I'm not much of an actress, I do very well."

Looking at her, and marking her beauty and her grace and her refinement, I could easily believe that statement.

"I do very well," she repeated drearily; "but I'm not my own mistress, as you will understand; that is why I must leave you at nine o'clock. I'm in the after-piece at the —— Theatre now, and I must start. Has my story been worth your hearing?"

"I am glad I came up," I said emphatically; "but though we must part now, you will let me see you again. Can't you make a friend of me?"

"No, I can't," she said decidedly. "I was in hopes you would prove to be a good, old, motherly sort of woman; but, as you're not that, we must have done with

one another when we part to-night, and we must part now—in five minutes I must start.”

She rose up and held out her hand to me, and I pressed it warmly—a little, soft, white, tender hand it was.

“I wish I could serve you in some way,” I said.

“Serve me! You! How could you do it? How should you do it? O, no, no, no! I must be left to myself, if you please. You must not reward my good-natured desire to give you something to write about that should have the stamp of truth upon it by interfering with me. You may go with me in my cab as far as Waterloo Place if you like, for I dare say you feel rather at a loss how to get away from here.”

I accepted her offer of a cab as far as Waterloo Place simply because I was desirous of seeing more of her. She made some very slight change in her toilet, and was ready immediately; and at Waterloo Place we parted, her cabman hailing another

for me, and I thought I had seen the last of her for ever.

I had been very much taken by her beauty, very much interested in her story, very much affected by her sorrows ; and it was with a pang of regret that I took my seat in a railway carriage on the Great Western line, that was homeward bound, the following day. It was a broken link, and I longed to mend it ; but being powerless, I resigned myself to circumstances, and gave up the idea of following out the romance which she had opened to me.

I had forbore to question her as to the name under which she acted ; but I could not resist questioning several friends, who were much in the dramatic world, as to the various " Nellies " and " Lillies " and " Maries " who are advertised so familiarly in the London daily press, in the hope that I might identify her fairly. However, I never heard anything of her by dint of these inquiries ; and I had just come to the conclusion that I might as well give up my

quest, and that she had deceived me as to her theatrical career, when a light was thrown upon my Madonna-faced beauty and her fate.

Many months had elapsed since my discovery of the little way-side cross. Once more I was suffering from ill-health and inertness, and now I determined to try a change of air and sea-bathing. We pitched our tent in Torquay; in other words, we put up at the "Imperial Hotel" for a period, and suffered the world and all its business to wag on as if it "was no concern at all" of ours, and in my idleness I began to plot and plan how I could turn the little story I had heard last spring to account.

At that date it never occurred to me to write it down truthfully, because it seemed to be so unfinished.

One morning, when I was very tired of toiling up and down the eternal hills, when Bishopstowe and the baths and the bay were alike wearisome to me, I went back to the hotel and settled myself in the reading-

room for a thorough perusal of the daily papers. Sitting there, half buried in the arms of one of the big luxurious lounges, I became an unintentional eavesdropper to a conversation that was being carried on between a party of four who were seated near to me. My attention was caught and arrested by the following words, spoken in an elderly woman's voice :

"I shall never forget, dear Bernard, that you were the one who tried to save my poor, dear child, and that you saw her last."

"After that malicious scandal I could not risk injuring her reputation by remaining at Exeter ; but she gave me her assurance, before we parted, that she would return to you," a very florid male voice replied ; and then I peered over the arm of my sofa, and scanned the group.

It consisted of an elderly lady (in whose features I traced a strong resemblance to the heroine of the way-side cross) ; a young girl, who was clearly a youthful edition of the

Madonna-faced beauty I had met under Temple Bar; a handsome, distinguished-looking man, and a strikingly fashionable-looking woman. These last two were evidently husband and wife, and as evidently they were only recently made husband and wife. The lady had that unmistakable air of "bride on a wedding-tour" about her which is patent to the initiated.

"The letter she wrote to me from Exeter, when she was hopeful of getting her freedom from that wretch, who only married her to torture her, it seems to me, certainly did not prepare me for what followed," the elder lady resumed. "That miserable letter from York, where she said she was dying, was a cruel blow. We hunted York without delay, but never got a trace of her. Do you think she really is dead, Bernard?"

"I fear there is no doubt of it," the florid voice replied; and then the fashionable-looking woman by his side said,

"It is such a pity she left her husband— isn't it? I think it's so much better to bear

anything rather than create a public scandal. I tell Bernard that he'll never get rid of me in that way."

"Or in any other, I hope, my dear," the elder lady said. "Bernard's happiness is very dear to me, as you will understand when I tell you that he was my poor lost daughter's best friend. He followed her to Exeter when she ran away from her husband, and tried to restore her to us; but she was always so wilful—poor, dear, headstrong girl—always so wilful!"

I rose up, and went to look at the visitors' book. If "Bernard's" surname began with an L, I should feel sure he was the hero of my way-side cross story. They had only arrived that morning, I learned from the porter who waited in the hall—a bridegroom and his bride. Presently I found his name, "Bernard Leslie, Esq., from Paris."

So he was the "B.L." who had shocked her out of all faith in humankind; and now he was lying to and deceiving the mother, as

he had lied to and deceived the daughter. And he was married and happy and prosperous and esteemed—"flourishing like a green bay-tree," while she was playing in after-pieces at a second-rate theatre.

I closed the visitors' book with a sigh of regret that there was no better end to my story than this.

THE END.

MISS ELLINGTON'S NIECE.

A LOVE STORY.

PEOPLE pitied Laura Ellington very much when she was, by the death of her grandfather, left alone in the world, as they phrased it. That is to say, a great deal of verbal pity was expressed for the pretty young lady, but in reality there was little felt; for it was a tolerably well understood fact that old Ellington had been a very dubious kind of guardian to his grand-daughter.

Moreover, it would have been hard to feel pity for such a girl as Laura Ellington, even had she not been left the wealthy, unfettered girl she was by her grandfather's will. It would have been hard to feel "pity" for that

handsome clear, brown-skinned girl, with the deep grey eyes and the nut-brown hair, with the finely rounded, erect figure, and the proudly poised little head. Pity and Laura Ellington rarely occurred to the minds and hearts of men simultaneously.

She was the only daughter of old Mr. Ellington's only son, and for many years, ever since the death of her parents—when she was quite a child, in fact—she had lived with her grandfather in the handsome old family mansion in one of the Regent's Park terraces. Friends of the family speculated about her a good deal, and conjectures were rife as to whether the old man's attractive companion would be his heiress or not. The doubt was caused by this fact—Laura had a brother.

Many years before the date of the opening of this story—when Laura Ellington was a little girl of four, indeed—this brother, then a young man of twenty-one, had shocked his family out of all natural affection for him by marrying suddenly and strangely. He was

at Oxford, reading for honours they all thought, when one morning to them there came these tidings: he had outraged authority and been rusticated; he had outraged common-sense and got himself married to a nobody.

In hot wrath the Ellington family inquired angrily of the offender himself why he had done these things; and when he pleaded his wife's charm of grace and beauty in extenuation of his folly, they refused to listen to him. Even his mother turned a cold deaf ear to the voice of her first-born, now that he had acted in opposition to her wishes. Even his father had no sympathy with a young man's love for a fair face. While as for his grandfather, the head of the house, he cast off the luckless scion of it utterly.

Young Ellington was as proud as the proudest of them. He tore their letters of reproof and renunciation to tatters, and with his wife went forth to fight the battle of life without making any further sign to them. His little sister soon forgot him; and

so, when her grandfather died and she was left his sole heiress, she was not troubled with compunctions of conscience respecting the brother who ought, at least, to have shared with her. Whether he had died in distress or was living in poverty, whether the world had been kind or cruel to him, she did not know, and, to tell the truth, she did not very much care.

"I was an infant when Robert cut himself off from his family by his own folly," she would say to the few who did venture to name him to her; and in that speech was comprised all the knowledge she had of the brother who had left boyhood behind him when she was a baby.

Miss Ellington was left the uncontrolled mistress of herself and of all the possessions that had been her grandfather's; and these possessions were not few. In addition to the big, magnificent, dreary house in the Regent's Park, she owned a fair estate in one of the midland counties, and a good deal²² of house property in one of the most crowded

and busiest metropolitan districts. Altogether her income was a large one; and her "responsibilities were proportionably great," she tried to feel as she sat in her stately drawing-room alone the night after her grandfather's funeral.

Miss Ellington was alone. Several dozen devoted friends and acquaintances would have been enchanted to share her solitude and her luxury, her grief and her seclusion. But Laura was an independent-minded girl; and so, when one correct female friend after another had been proposed to her as a sort of unofficial chaperon for the time, she had declared her intention of protecting and countenancing herself for the future unaided until she married.

She had been very fond of the old man, who, in his turn, had idolized her; and she was thinking of him tearfully now as she sat alone, with the words of the solemn funeral service still ringing in her ears. Still she knew that she did not regret him very much, in the honest acceptance of the word.

He had idolized her, but he had also thwarted her will; and Miss Ellington was not one to meekly endure having her will thwarted.

She was four-and-twenty now, and it will readily be understood that she had not reached those years unscathed, unloving, and unloved. "Talk about experience!" she had often said hotly to her grandfather; "I have been through a very fiery furnace, and learned more in my journey than the tame experience of a hundred years can teach me." And then her grandfather had been wont to shake his head sadly, and to lament over the ill-regulated mind that had made the ordeal he had condemned her to a fiery one.

Three years ago, on the occasion of the celebration of her twenty-first birthday, she had fallen in love. She gave herself up to the free indulgence of the luxury the feeling was to her for a few weeks, and then she was rudely aroused, and compelled to own herself wanting in judgment for having so

given up. The man she loved had the misfortune to be poor, too poor to keep a wife in any position at all, too poor to dare to risk the dangers of matrimony with such a delicately nurtured woman as Laura, unless Laura's grandfather would secure her from discomfort and dependence by making her a fixed allowance.

Captain Meredith told Laura this truth openly and honestly—unfortunately, he did not tell it to her until after he had told her how he loved her, and won the tale of her love from her in return. She told it to him passionately, rapturously. Her young, handsome artillery captain was a hero in her eyes—no grandfather could withstand him, she thought—no human being could deem her other than fortunate and enviable in having won his love. She fired her lover with some of the ardour of her faith. It was a surprise to the young man when his suit was rejected by old Mr. Ellington—a surprise to the young man, but a bad, bitter shock to the girl.

For a few days after her grandfather had given his definitive in some hard sentences, in which he declared his determination that "no pauper should batten on his heiress," the girl nourished a hope. It was a wild, foolish hope; it was soon proved a fallacious one. "If Guy Meredith asks me to run away with him, I'll forfeit everything and do it," she said to herself. But Guy Meredith was a man of honour, and so he would not tempt Laura to make any sacrifice in her haste which she might reasonably be expected to repent of at her leisure.

He said good-by to her sadly enough, and left her to the misery that eats out the freshness from the heart of many a passionate young maiden. They loved each other; but the knowledge that they did so gave her no comfort when once the truth was borne in upon her mind that, well as he loved her, he loved honour more. "We must trust to time, and be faithful to each other," he whispered to her in their last stolen inter-

view ; " my prospects must improve, and then, Laura, will you come to me ? "

Would she go to him then ? How her heart throbbed as he asked the question ! Did he not know right well that she would go to him then or now, or at any moment ? She longed to burst the bonds of the instinct of maidenly reserve, and tell him that she would follow him through all the world without ever giving a thought to that which she would relinquish. She longed to do this ; but she restrained herself strongly, gave him the promise to be faithful to him, and to hope for better times feebly, and then they parted.

All this had happened three years ago, and the name of Guy Meredith had never been heard in their circle since. For a while she had nurtured wrath against her grandfather for the cold way in which he had caused a cloud to obscure the sun of her young love. But, after a time, when she learned from other sources that Guy's prospects were brightening, she forgave her

grandfather, and began to look forward joyfully to the day when Captain Meredith should come and test her constancy.

He had exchanged into a regiment that was going to India, and when he had been in India long enough to master some of the dialects, he had been given a good staff appointment, where his services as interpreter made him of note, and paved the way to speedy promotion. As soon as he could get leave he was coming home to demand his bride. Laura's heart beat proudly and fondly of all she, whom he believed to be penniless, could endow him with.

"I hope he will not hear it until he has asked me to be his wife," she thought; there is no engagement between us, and I should like him to seek me again before he knows I'm an heiress." Then she went on to plan out for him a career that would keep him in England. He should be a magistrate; he should breed prize cattle, and hunters, and greyhounds. He should go into Parliament, and make her as proud of

him as she felt it was in her to be of her own noble-hearted Guy. On the whole, it must be admitted that her meditations on the evening after her grandfather's funeral were not misanthropical.

Old Mr. Ellington died in May, and early in June Laura received a letter from a legal firm advising her of the death of her almost forgotten brother, and of the existence of his daughter; to which latter fact they begged to call her special attention. At first, on receipt of this letter, Miss Ellington was very much shocked. Then she felt rather surprised at the actual existence of a live niece. And then she felt considerably bored as she reflected that it unquestionably behoved her to see to that niece's well-being.

As soon as she had convinced herself of this responsibility she set to work to fulfil it. "A child will be greatly in my way when I marry," she said candidly to her friends; "but I feel it to be my duty to adopt and provide for my brother's daughter." And then her friends suggested various

schools at home and abroad where Miss Ellington's niece could be taken in and done for at a more or less reasonable rate.

It was a sharp pang of mingled pleasure and pain that assailed her when she first looked upon her niece. The senior partner of the firm that had first written on the subject brought Kate Ellington to her aunt's house ; and then, in place of the child whom she had expected, Miss Ellington saw a woman very little younger and even more beautiful than herself. She had never thought of her brother's child as grown up and pretty, far less had she thought of her as fascinating, self-possessed, and fully conscious of her own claims to consideration, as this young lady appeared to be.

Kate Ellington had the beauty of a Venus and the fatal gift of pleasing of a Vivien. Miss Ellington's own eyes were deeply grey, and beautifully fringed with black lashes, but they lacked the luminous splendour of Kate's violet orbs. Miss Ellington's locks were a bonny bright brown that would

glitter as though there were golden threads in it in the sun ; but these locks did not, however deftly arranged, crown her head with the queenly grace that Kate imparted to the most careless tiring of her ruddy auburn tresses. Miss Ellington had a finely formed, erect figure, but it seemed insignificant and stiff by the side of Kate's magnificently formed bust and grand languor of bearing. In short, the aunt was a very pretty woman—the niece a very beautiful one.

Kate was an enigma. She candidly confessed that she was ignorant, that she knew nothing of the usages of good society, and that she had frequently faced actual privation. Yet whatever subject she spoke about had a charm for her hearers ; her manners were perfect, and her tastes and habits as extravagant as if from her babyhood she had been allowed the unlimited control of money. For many years her father had held a situation of trust in a county bank in a garrison town. "It was a post that was more honourable

than remunerative," Kate said coolly; "so, as you may imagine, Aunt Laura, my fasts were more frequent than my festivals."

"You don't mean to say you ever wanted—were hungry, and couldn't have things?" Laura cried in high excitement.

"Oh, no!" the beauty answered; "my privations were of a different order, but they were privations nevertheless. I had to wear scant skirts when full ones were the fashion, and *vice versá*, and I would rather have been hungry than that any day."

"In other words, your papa couldn't afford to dress you well," Laura said rather crossly.

"Exactly; and you who have always been able to dress as you like, don't know the full horror of it. I never could be afforded anything striking until it was going out, so I was always behindhand. Papa used to try and make me believe that I looked well in anything, the simpler the better; but I knew better than that. I wish, as you're so good, that I had been let know you before."

"Perhaps I couldn't have helped you before, Kate."

"Perhaps not, so it doesn't signify. I know you now, and I'm only twenty, so I have plenty of time before me."

"For what, Kate?"

"For 'fulfilling my destiny;' isn't that the slang expression people use for marrying and having children? I wonder you haven't married, Aunt Laura."

"I think I will tell you why I haven't," Laura said, half to herself, half to her niece; but even as she made up her mind to do it a fear assailed her that Kate would not understand the motives that had actuated Captain Meredith, and the love that had kept her constant to him.

"I think I should like to hear your story," Kate said, languidly, placing herself as she spoke in the depths of a softly-cushioned sofa. "Don't introduce any irrelevant matter please, Aunt Laura, or I shall forget who's who."

"I think you are forgetting that already,"

Laura said coldly. She did not desire to live on other than terms of perfect equality with her niece; but she certainly had no intention of quietly suffering her niece to assume airs of superiority over her. So she said that she thought Kate was forgetting who was who already, and then felt nervously fearful lest Kate should feel crushed.

But Kate was apparently quite unconscious of the rebuke conveyed so mildly.

"I assure you I'm all attention and comprehension," she said, laughing. "Now, dear Aunt Laura, confide in me and I will give you my advice," she said saucily. And then Laura related that little experience of hers with regard to Captain Meredith.

"And so you have waited for each other for three years. And now you'll reward him with your hand and your fortune. Is he nice?"

"That is no word for him. Oh, Kate! I can't tell you what a good, dear fellow

he is. I fell in love with his handsome face first, I acknowledge, but I soon got to think only of his cleverness and goodness—”

“Dear me! I should never fall in love with a man’s goodness,” Kate interrupted; “it’s such an abstract thing. Is he good style?”

“Of course he is,” Laura said scornfully. “Don’t I tell you that he belongs to a branch of one of our best and oldest families. He’s a thorough gentleman, Kate. He couldn’t do a mean thing, or a false thing, or a cruel thing.”

“In short, ‘he’s a darling and a king, my Hugo!’” Kate sang, laughing. “I wonder what he will think of *me*?” She rose up on one elbow as she spoke, and held the other hand out to attract Laura’s attention. The movement caused her sleeve to fall back, and disclosed an arm so rarely proportioned and coloured, that the statuesque character of her beauty impressed itself afresh upon her aunt.

“Think of you! He will think you superb, Kate,” she said; and Kate smiled and replied:

“But men don’t care to have their wives’ nieces haunting their houses perpetually, however superb they may be. *We* are too nearly of an age for him to feel that you are bound to be my protectress, though you have been good enough to act as if you thought so. If he doesn’t like me for myself, he will feel me to be an intruder.”

“He will like you for yourself—of course he will like you for yourself,” Laura said, impatiently. I wish you hadn’t raised the question, Kate; you are *my* niece, that will be enough for Guy.”

“Notwithstanding, I shall wish him to like me for myself if I am to live in his house,” Kate said quietly, and then there was a pause; and when Laura Ellington spoke, some few minutes afterward, it was on another subject.

The day came at last when Guy Meredith was to come to claim his bride. He had

never once in his letters alluded to her grandfather's death, and Laura rightly conjectured that he did not know of it. Her fortune, her position as positive possessor of all the old man's wealth, was unknown to Guy as yet, and Laura loved to think that it was so—loved to feel that it was for herself (only herself) that she was sought. When the hour came for his arrival such a soft, bright flush mounted to her cheek that she looked even younger than her magnificent niece, who was feeling rather bored by all this "fuss and excitement," as she termed it, about the advent of another woman's lover.

He came at last; and Miss Ellington's niece saw in her aunt's future husband "nothing extraordinary," she averred to herself, with some satisfaction. He was a well-grown and well set up man, with a soldierly bearing, a gentlemanly address, and a face that would have been handsome if it had not "been bronzed out of all harmony with his light blue eyes," she said. And he

saw in her the realization of every wild dream of sumptuous beauty which he had ever dreamed. Even as Laura, holding him proudly by the hand, introduced him to her niece in the words, "This is the Guy Meredith I have told you of, Kate: he is going to be my husband,"—even as she said these words with such an intensity of affection and pride and trust in him, he felt his heart beat more quickly as he met the violet eyes of the one who was gifted with such beauty and grace as might have been hers who tempted Lancelot from his knightly allegiance, and wrought the ruin of the round table.

Their paths apparently lay smoothly before them. He had but to renew his offer in order to be accepted; and when he had renewed it, justifying it by the assertion that now he could maintain her as she ought to be maintained, she told him of the old man's death and her own riches. "I am glad you did not know any of this before you came back to me, my own true Guy," she said; "it is such a joy to me to be able to tell you that all

this is *mine*, and that all that's mine is thine from this day forth!" She spoke these words very joyously, and it crushed her spirits rather when he replied despondingly,

"I wish to Heaven your grandfather had acceded to our moderate wishes and enabled us to marry three years ago. A little then would have made us happier than——" He paused abruptly, and she asked, anxiously,

"'Than' what, Guy?"

"Than the delay has made us," he answered confusedly.

"Delay has not been dangerous in our case," she said fondly. "Guy, these three past years seem as nothing now I see you again; and I do rejoice in my wealth and in the power it gives us for your sake."

He took her hand and kissed it almost humbly. "You good, true woman," he said in a low voice, "I will do my best to make you feel that delay has not been dangerous in our case."

"How strangely you speak, Guy!" she

said. "Why, delay has been our friend—has aggrandized you and enriched me; and I am not less pretty, less graceful, less loveable, than I was three years ago—am I?" she added anxiously.

He took her in his arms then and kissed her, assuring her passionately that she was more than all these things; but still something in his tones rang untrue, although his words were kind.

And while he was embracing and reassuring her, the beautiful niece who was dependent on Miss Ellington came into the room, and looked with grandly wondering eyes upon the scene.

"I am sure I beg your pardon," she said, "but really I had no idea I should intrude upon anything so poetical as the embrace of a pair of reunited lovers. Captain Meredith will be longer in according me his forgiveness than you will be, Aunt Laura. I see it in his eyes."

"Indeed you read their language wrongly," he said warmly; and Kate shrugged her handsome shoulders as she answered,

"*You'll* think me beneath anger when you hear my mission." Then she turned to Miss Ellington and put out her hands with a pity-imploring gesture. "They say beggars mustn't be choosers; but don't condemn me to that odious tea-green suit which Mrs. Bertrand says she had express orders from you to make for me."

"Oh, Kate, I thought it lovely!" Laura said eagerly.

"Did you so? Well, I pity your taste, and resign myself," Kate said, looking through her lashes.

"Don't keep it if you dislike it," Miss Ellington said, in a slightly offended tone. The costume under discussion had cost her much care and thought. It was new in colour and rich in material, and was well suited to display the peculiar beauty and brilliancy of her beautiful and brilliant niece. It struck Miss Ellington as hard, rather, that Kate should elect to make herself out aggrieved, even in such a minor matter as this, before Captain Meredith.

“What did your niece mean by saying beggars mustn’t be choosers?” he asked, rather constrainedly, of Laura a little later.

“Don’t call her my niece in that hesitating way, Guy.”

“What shall I call her? *You* are Miss Ellington.”

“Call her Kate.”

“That sounds too familiar.”

“Please don’t stand upon the order of your speech to her; she will think you dislike her if you are stiff.”

“Dislike her,” he repeated, in an impassioned tone; “she’s not a creature to call forth that faculty. How lovely she is, to be sure!” he added enthusiastically. Then he bent down and kissed Laura’s hand, which she had put out to him when she had made her protest against the exceeding formality of his mention of her niece—bent down and kissed it. Kissed it tenderly; but still not as he would have kissed it three years ago, she felt.

It was not well with any one of those

three, seemingly, that night. A pang of doubt—of doubt which she could not dissolve, could not analyse even—had assailed Laura. It seemed to her that a change had come over Guy—her once ardent-hearted, noble-souled lover. But in what this change consisted it was impossible to say. He was almost the same, but not quite the same; and how one hates the almost, under such circumstances.

And a more horrible pang than even this doubt had assailed Guy Meredith. Laura distrusted something vague; but he distrusted a more dangerous tangibility. He distrusted that dreadfully beautiful niece's power over him—the affianced of her aunt. He knew that his heart was revolting already against the allegiance he had voluntarily vowed. He knew himself failing, in fact—failing in all those qualities of honour and constancy and consistency on which he had once prided himself. He knew himself bewitched—hopelessly and foolishly bewitched—by the graciously beautiful siren,

who on the surface was so oblivious of him and of his adoration.

But oblivious only on the surface. In the heart which throbbed under that grandly modelled chest she had planned many a pretty artifice, many a winning wile. And that which she had cleverly planned she had fairly executed. Before he had been thrown in contact with her a month, he had learned to look with admiring interest on every fresh phase of her splendid caprice. She was by turns indifferent and careless to him and to every one else, and carefully charming. He hardly knew which manner beseemed her best, which grace of hers was more dazzling to him. It was a very fiery furnace this, through which the gallant young officer was passing, and he got most horribly singed in the ordeal.

As for Kate, she was "only fulfilling her destiny," she told herself, reassuringly. Her father had been unjustly treated—robbed of his birth-right by the very man who had enriched her aunt. It was only poetical

justice, if in turn she took to herself something that was of value to that aunt. Only poetical justice, even if she squandered it.

So she reasoned; so in pity for her womanliness let us believe she felt. At any rate she did not hold her hand. At any rate she did not indulge herself with the luxury of being merciful. If it was fine to spare, it was also fine to spoil. "Let those take who have the power, and let those keep who can," she said, with one of the prettiest waves of her pretty head. And at the time she said it she felt tolerably certain that she had the power to take, and that "Aunt Laura" had not the power to keep.

"Oh! the dalliance and the wit! the flattery and the strife!" That period was so full of all these elements to the trio with whom these annals have to deal. It came to an end at length; and the end came in this way:

The wedding-day was fixed—the wedding-day which was to see consummated that long-

tried fealty and love which had been between Laura Ellington and Guy Meredith. And as soon as it was fixed, anxious heed was taken of it, and all and sundry were on their mettle to do it honour. Into the midst of the festal strain of preparation there came this passing discord : Kate would not be the bride'smaid of her aunt ! Kate was determined to seek another home !

The announcement of this intention came upon Miss Ellington like a thunder-clap. When ? why ? what did it portend ? It had all along been understood that Kate should live with them. She looked at her lover for his endorsement of this expression, and she read only blank dismay in his face. " I do not wish to part with her," she said. " I owe something to my brother's child—something that we will both strive to repay ; won't we, Guy ? "

" Don't ask me—don't ask me, for Heaven's sake."

" Why not ? Oh ! Guy, what is this that has come upon you, making you doubt if

my niece can be your niece too?" The woman who was still young asked this question, with a wild fear upon her of the younger, more attractive woman. A fear that she hoped and prayed might be assuaged in his answer; and this is how he answered her:

"Oh, Laura, I said truly enough that delays are dangerous; we have delayed over-long. My heart is less worthy of you, being less wholly yours than when I parted from you."

"But the delay was none of my making," she cried.

"Nor was it of my making; it was of fortune's making. We were parted because—because it was expedient we should part; and now we must rue the fruits of such expediency. Three years ago I could have withstood Venus herself, if you had been the price of withstanding; but now, Kate's beauty has gone into my soul, and I love her, Laura."

He said the last words in so contrite a

tone that she dared not have blamed him, even if her pride would have let her do so.

"Be it so," she said. "Substitute 'Kate' for 'Laura' Ellington, and let all be the same, if she agrees."

"I dare not ask her," he said passionately. "What am I made of, do you think, that I could dare to offer her a heart that has been laid at another woman's shrine?"

"How you love her!" she said bitterly.

"Ay, how I love her!" he responded, with equal bitterness; "and how lightly my love will weigh with her? She will despise me for my looseness of purpose—for the very weakness which has made me her slave. When I shall be simply your left-off lover, Heaven help me!"

"And Heaven help *her* to bear the hearing that her scorn is your worst grief!" Laura said in a low voice. "We must be clear from this point—we must understand each other, however *she* may misconstrue your exalted motives. If money can smooth

your path to a marriage with my niece, it shall be smooth."

• "Laura! why didn't you marry me three years ago?"

"Why! do you ask why? Could I force you to the altar against your prudent convictions? Ah! Guy, there are some things better worth having than silver and gold. I have these, and I have nothing else. Three years ago I would have followed you blindly through all the world, like the wakened beauty in the 'Day Dream;' but you were overwise, and this is the result."

She bent down her head and sobbed; but when he came near to comfort her, she shrank away.

"No; all that is over," she said; "Kate has won you—"

"Against my will," he interrupted.

"Yes; against your will, against your judgment, against your taste. I know all that," she cried impetuously; "still she has won you, and if you find that you can win her, you shall have a richly endowed bride."

They parted then very mournfully, as friends.

The day that had been fixed for the wedding-day arrived; and Kate—on whom the conviction had dawned that there was a screw loose between her aunt and her aunt's betrothed—sat biding the issue of it in a white morning gown that could easily be displaced for the more elaborate bridal array. Suddenly, upon her seclusion, Laura Ellington, the bride-elect, broke, and Kate, looking up languidly, asked—

“Isn't Captain Meredith rather late?”

“He is here waiting for you,” was the answer.

“For me!” Kate said, the remembrance of all her little machinations causing a blush to come into her cheeks.

“Yes, for you—the man who was to have been my husband waiting for you to go to the altar with him,” Laura Ellington pursued excitedly. “I am only three or four years older than you, Kate; yet your life

begins to-day, and mine ends. Will you marry him?"

"Me! Aunt Laura, what bad taste!" The girl, who had harmonious instincts in spite of her inherent coquetry, sprang to her feet as she spoke.

"Yes, you. This house, the country place—all my property—shall be yours as soon as you are his wife."

"*His* wife! Captain Meredith's wife! *You* are to be that, Aunt Laura."

"I was to have been; but—ah! this has been play to you, but worse than death to me," the poor, heart-sore woman cried. "He loved me, and was prudent; and when the reign of prudence was over, he was false. Oh, Kate! Kate! am I mad?"

Her niece could not answer her question. The winning of Captain Meredith's heart, and the undermining of Captain Meredith's honour, had been a very pleasant pastime to this young lady; but she had not contemplated anything so serious as this. She did not want to marry Guy Meredith herself.

"It is impossible to marry all the men who love one, you know," she argued coolly, when he asked her to do so. Besides, wider fields were open to her, for Laura Ellington executed a deed of gift, whereby her niece became possessed of all her wealth. And shortly afterward, that last frantic appeal of Laura—"Kate! Kate! am I mad?" was answered tangibly. "Poor Miss Ellington" (people pitied her more than ever now) was removed from her own "luxurious abode" (so the penny-a-liner had it) to the confines of a private lunatic asylum, where she still lives. Always dressed in white, like the bride she believes herself to be; and always stung to frenzy by the suspicion of anything like a prudential movement, or the sight of a bit of red cloth. The one recalls the conduct, the other the cloth of the lover who left her.

As for him! Kate never rewarded the perfidy she had caused. The beautiful Miss Ellington, possessed of all her aunts' wealth, played for higher stakes than a poor captain

in the line, with a temporarily good staff appointment. She married a peer of the realm, who is endowed with a great gift of forbearance—and it may be added that her Aunt Laura is not the only woman she has driven mad.

THE END.

MISS BEECHER AND MISS BYNG.

CHAPTER I.

"I AM lucky to have caught you in the garden, Trixy! I was afraid I should have to go in and pay a set formal call on mamma and you, in the drawing-room."

"It needn't be either 'set or formal' just because it happens to be in a drawing-room, Ned, and for goodness' sake don't call me 'Trixy;' you know I hate it, and yet you and everybody else will persist in using it."

"I always forget," he says hurriedly, and though he means his words to be taken as an apology for his forgetfulness, there is nothing apologetic in either his tone or

manner. "I am always doing something stupid now, and putting you out of patience with me, Trix—Trixy."

"Never mind, you poor, awkward old fellow," she says good-temperedly, banishing the cloud of annoyance from her brow in a moment, as she detects something earnest and unfeigned in his accents. "I am privileged to be as cross as I please to-day, you know."

"Yes," he says eagerly, "to-day and every other day as far as I'm concerned. I came up to wish you many happy returns of the day. I have been thinking of that poem of Longfellow's all the morning, Trixy—

‘Standing with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet,
Womanhood and childhood fleet.’”

"The feet are not a bit reluctant," she laughs out, forgetting, in her amazement at the sentimental mistake he is making, to call him to account for addressing her by the obnoxious name again. "So far from being

reluctant they are ready and willing to leap into all that's before them. My name will be put on mamma's card now. I shall go up and stay a good part of the season with Ada in town, and my allowance is to be doubled at once; don't talk about my feet being 'reluctant' any more."

"You haven't mentioned the one thing that has made me look forward to this day as the day of days," he says, taking her hand in his as he speaks. "The embargo is off me, and I am free now to speak to your guardian; I may now openly try to win you for my wife."

"Now, don't begin at once, Ned," the girl says, sobering down suddenly. "Do let us have a little pleasant sailing about before heavy weather sets in. I remember all the fuss there was about Ada and her marriage; it worried the dear mother awfully, though there was no money difficulty then to be got over, you know. Do let her have a little pleasure with one daughter. She looked about eighteen her-

self to-day when she came into my room and said, 'Now, Trixy, you may go everywhere with me,' and when I saw how happy she was, I blessed my eighteenth birthday for having arrived to give her the happiness."

They have come close to the house during the course of this conversation, and Trixy is about to run up the steps as she brings her speech to a conclusion. But the man by her side restrains her with the words—

"Take another turn on the lawn with me. We must understand each other clearly before I go to your mother to ask her to back up my appeal to Mr. Maples."

"Not to-day—not to-day," she pleads. "We *are* so happy now—not to-day, Ned."

"And I have arranged things so that I have a few hours at command to-day; this may not happen again in a hurry, Trixy. Moreover, shall we not be happier when this is settled openly?"

"I am not so sure of that," she answers quickly. "We should only be tied down

to each other and not one bit nearer marriage than we are now."

"That's not your own sentiment; it's your mother's. She's been trying to set you against me."

"She never tried to set me against a dog, much less a human being, in my life," the girl cries indignantly. "Can't you understand—can't you see? I have only come into freedom to-day; better leave it for a little time, Ned. I was such a child eighteen months ago."

"You're repenting of your bargain, Trixy," the young man says reproachfully.

"My bargain! Were you bargaining with me? Oh, dear! *can't* you understand? I've been under governesses and masters ever since I can remember, and now to-day I'm free, with only mamma to think of, and thoughts of mamma are all joy and fun; and now you want to come at once and make me feel I don't belong to myself again. Be wise, Ned; let everything just go on as it is now."

She turns a pretty, pleading, bright, young earnest face towards him as she speaks. Her affectionate hazel eyes seem to beseech him to "let well alone;" her wind-roughened hazel hair, drawn up high in soft undulating waves from her brow and neck, catches a golden glimmer from a passing sunbeam, and glistens in a way that gives her momentarily fresh beauty. On the whole it must be conceded that he would be rather more or less than man if he resigned her without a struggle, or awarded her the perfect liberty for which she is pleading.

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
And win or lose it all."

he quotes solemnly, and Trixy Beecher looks at him scrutinisingly, and fails to find him less selfish than she had thought him before for thus pertinaciously sticking to his point.

"Put it to the touch and lose it all then if you please," she says drily. "I certainly

shall not back you up if you insist on bringing this—this childish folly forward to mar mamma's happiness to-day. Come, Ned, say you'll be sensible, and come in and let us be comfortable, or have your own way and find out for yourself that *we* don't forgive errors of taste."

She turns her fearless face full upon him as she speaks, and he feels that she is not a girl to be coerced by him into any plan of action which is not agreeable to herself. He remembers at the same time that the foundation upon which he is building his hopes is a very insecure one; it is nothing more than the half-promise of a child of sixteen. Remembering this, he tells himself that there is more honour in retreating than in being beaten back. Accordingly, he accedes to her request that he will go in and be comfortable and say nothing more about it to-day, or indeed for some time to come.

"Mamma is up in her own room still. I'll go and tell her you're here, Ned.

Meantime, get all the vases and specimen glasses filled with water for me, and sort the flowers out. I am going to turn this room into a bower."

She puts the basket of flowers into his hand without so much as giving him one look in exchange for the sentimental one he is levelling at her, and goes upstairs to her mother, shouting to her dogs as she goes in clear, ringing, heart-free tones.

He forgets all about her commands as to the vases and the flowers, and stands idly gazing around the room and out of the window upon objects that all seem to bear some affinity to Trixy, and that at the same time seem to mark clearly and strongly the difference that exists between the sphere to which this girl belongs and his own far humbler and coarser one.

The room is long and low, graceful and light, without being fantastic and glaring. The wide French windows, opening under a verandah, are open now, and the filmy-white muslin curtains float inwards occa-

sionally as the soft summer wind comes sighing up. The walls are coloured a dark bluish-grey, and the groundwork of the cretonne furniture is of precisely the same tint. The floor is covered with Indian matting, over which large gorgeously-hued Persian rugs are spread. Ebony cabinets full of rare old china stand against the wall at a short distance from each other. Black brackets support figures of shepherdesses and Cupids, of pug-dogs and delicately designed groups of flowers in old Chelsea and Dresden china. Old fashioned mirrors of Venetian and German glass hang about here and there on dark velvet shields. Statuettes and bronzes stand about on pedestals.

A new grand piano, a birthday present from Trixy's guardian, has a place on one side, and lines of well-bound books in long low cases face it on the other. Flowers and ferns flourish freely in every available corner. Growing ivy is trained up over trellis-work, making a bower of a little alcove. A large

sheet of plate glass fills up the fire-place in these summer days, and in front of it one of Rimmel's little fountains splashes up rose-water. Just outside, suspended from the top of the verandah, a large cage containing a gorgeous macaw hangs. A long-haired, white Russian terrier is lying on one of the sofas, together with a huge grey Angora cat. There are a fitness, a refinement, a grace and delicacy about the room and its adornments that strike upon him painfully to-day as he contrasts them all with the home he has made for himself in the adjoining village, where he is practising as a surgeon. He remembers the bright colours in the carpets which his sisters have chosen, the shiny nobbly appearance of the chairs and sofa, which are covered in canary-coloured damask, the hard, crude look of the harsh, stiff, substantial curtains, and the absence of everything that is pleasant for the eye to rest upon.

As all these recollections assail him he does wish heartily that he had been con-

tented with lodgings until Trixy could give him the benefit of her taste, and he does also feel horribly ungrateful to those self-denying sisters of his who have spent all their savings of years for the sake of furnishing a house for him in a way that he now abhors.

"Ada and her husband are coming to us next week," Beatrix tells him when she rejoins him with an invitation that he should stay to dinner. "We wanted them to be here for to-day, but Mr. Floyd couldn't manage that. Wasn't it a pity?"

"You're very fond of your sister and brother-in-law."

"I should rather think I am fond of them," she answers quickly. "Why, Ada is one of the loveliest, sweetest darlings in the world, and Harold Floyd is clever and charming enough to command any amount of liking or love from anybody. Ada is so proud of him," the girl continues enthusiastically. "He has made such a name and position for himself."

"A man has a chance of doing that at the bar," he says, and she thinks he says it grudgingly.

"A 'chance'—yes. But how few take it as he has done? He made his great hit in that case, you know, that was tried two years ago—that dreadful case of poor Mrs. Forrester. They say if anything could have pulled her through, his cross-examining and speech would have done it."

The blood mounts to his brow as Trixy speaks. He forgets that he has no manner of authority over her, and so he says—

"I can't bear to hear your sympathies going with that horrible woman, or applauding any one who strove to vindicate her. She was only rightly served in being exposed and disgraced."

Her eyes open wide at this rebuff, but she does not think it worth while to combat his opinion, apparently. At any rate, she says nothing more about this special case, mention of which has brought down this

thunder upon her, but just goes on expatiating about her brother-in-law's talents generally.

"Mrs. Floyd is much older than you— isn't she?"

"Ages older," Trixy replies—"that is, ten years. She seems sometimes almost as old as mamma. She was the only child of my father's first marriage, you know, but she's as fond of my mother as if she was her own, and mamma is more easily influenced by Ada than by anybody else."

"I hope Ada will like me," he says, and he tries to say it in a light and jocular way, but there is a current of real earnestness in his remark, and Trixy detects it.

"Look here, Ned, don't set your heart on her liking, or on anything else," she says seriously. "You must do me this much justice—you must not let my silly childish words of two years ago stand against me now. If I am ever to like you well enough to marry you, you must start fresh from this point. If it come about

that I do, neither Ada nor any one else will stop me, but I won't be fettered by a promise to love that I made before I knew what love was!"

"Do you know any better—have you any more experience now than then?" he asks jealously, and Trixy flushes a little as she answers—

"I don't know what it is, but I begin to understand what it ought to be. I've been kept from all the follies of sham love-making, but I've read a great deal, and mamma has talked to me. What I feel for you isn't love, Ned, but I like you so much that I don't want you to make me hate you."

CHAPTER II.

MRS. BEECHER is in one of her best moods to-night, although Mr. Maples and Mr. Masters are not the two men in the world who are the most calculated to call forth the brightest electrical sparks from her. Nevertheless she makes herself almost as agreeable and interesting to them both as if they were both agreeable and interesting to her. The old London lawyer and the young country doctor are led on by their hostess to feel that really, after all, it is not a very difficult thing to talk almost as unreservedly and well to a woman who has the grace to listen and the wit to understand as if they were talking to men. She does by her manner aid them in

foisting the delusion upon themselves that it is *they* who are the entertainers instead of being the entertained.

That she sustains this brilliancy at the cost of a great effort to-night is known only to herself. Not even Trixy—her pet, her darling, her confidante—has any idea that a heavy blow has been dealt to her hopes.

This day she has heard from Trixy's guardian what Trixy's fortune really is, and she is smarting under the sense of having nourished a delusion for nearly eighteen years.

The facts of the case can be briefly told. Her husband, a man many years her senior, had died when little Beatrice was only six months old, and he had died telling the wife—who from the exercise of her eminent literary talents was already self-supporting—that, though he should not leave her anything, she would find that he had taken care of their child. This knowledge, he said, was to be given

to her fully when Trixy was eighteen, and he asked of her that she would in the interim bring Trixy up in such a way, and have her educated in such a manner, as should fit her for her future position.

The young, independent, high-spirited, capable woman never felt so much as one throb of indignation against the man who could so calmly leave her entirely to her own resources. She was accustomed to her work by this time; she had that genuine enthusiasm for it which repeated defeats and disappointments can neither kill nor crush. To go on labouring for herself and her child seemed no hardship to her, since she had the assurance that, should her labours fail to meet with their due reward, Trixy would be well provided for independently of her mother as soon as she was eighteen. To give Trixy every educational advantage, to surround her with everything that could conduce towards cultivating her natural talents, directing her tastes, and strengthening her judgment,

became henceforth Mrs. Beecher's great object.

This being the case, it may be imagined what her feelings have been this day, since the statement has been made by Mr. Maples that, though he has turned the little capital left by her late husband to the best account, all he has been able to realise for Trixy is the trifling income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year!

The blow has been a very heavy one; but all Mrs. Beecher says when she receives it is: "I am glad I know at last. Trixy and I must live more economically, that's all; for I can't leave my child to learn the lesson when I am gone."

"She may marry well," Mr. Maples says.

"Heaven forbid that she should make a mercenary marriage; and Heaven also forbid that she should make a poor one. I have no fear of her marrying a fool, for unless she is worked upon in some moment

of excitement to make some idiotic half-promise which her honour may be wrought upon to keep, she couldn't tolerate one for half an hour."

"Perhaps she may inherit her mamma's talent," Mr. Maples says politely.

"I would say 'Heaven forbid' that also, if I thought it possible for one moment that she would be married for it by-and-by by some man who would make her the bread-winner for the family he chose to raise up," Mrs. Beecher says gravely; "but we're taking time by the forelock, there are no wolves about this sheepfold at present."

"But wolves may not be the only dangerous animals to be found," he says drily; "who is this young man who has been spending the day here, and wandering about in the wood all the afternoon, getting ferns and ivy roots with Miss Trixy?"

Mrs. Beecher laughs, and waves her head in careless defiance of any danger from that quarter.

“He is a very nice, gentlemanly, pleasant young fellow, practising as a surgeon out at Holton—there is nothing to be feared from that quarter. Trixy is too adventurous, too ambitious, ever to fall in love with a man who has nothing but a dull nameless career before him.”

“Trixy is only a girl.”

“Granted,” Mrs. Beecher says, frowning a little; “but because we are two hours’ run from London don’t imagine that Trixy has been brought up as a mere country girl. I have kept her out of the swing of mere party-going and dissipation, but have not kept her from associating with men who are lights in their several professions. This young surgeon—pleasant, agreeable, gentlemanly, as he is—would be at a disadvantage in the society with which Trixy is already familiar, theoretically, through the mediumship of her brother-in-law and sister; don’t try to make him a ghost in my path, Mr. Maples, for I refuse to be frightened by him.”

It is about ten o'clock at night when Mr. Maples takes his departure for town by the latest train, after having spent what he declares to have been a "most delightful evening."

The railway station is very near to Mrs. Beecher's pretty little house, Thorncote, and the whole party walk to the train with Mr. Maples. On their return, the soft sweet night air of May keeps them out in the garden for a time, and when at length Trixy, in the pride of her new possession, goes in to try the new piano Mr. Maples has presented her with, her mother and Mr. Masters continue to stroll up and down outside the windows.

Presently she speaks of the subject that is uppermost in her mind.

"Do you know of any one who would be likely to take Thorncote furnished or unfurnished, Ned? For I am thinking of leaving it, and I have still eight years' lease to run."

"Thinking of leaving Thorncote?" he gasps.

"Yes, circumstances have arisen that make it incumbent on me to retrench; the fact is, Trixy comes into her heritage to-day, and her heritage is so very small that I must save for her; in order to do this I must work harder and spend less; therefore I must leave 'Thorncot.'"

Her heart swells as she says this, for she loves 'Thorncot,' the house she has cultivated into beauty. But it falls down again, and almost dies within her, when he stands right in front of her and says—

"Mrs. Beecher, let me work for Trixy—let her be my charge. I love her as my life. I am glad her heritage is less than you expected—I stand the better chance."

She has borne a good many blows in life without wincing, this hard-working, enduring, courageous woman; but now, when she hears such a possibility proposed as rather a desirable probability for her cherished child, she loses both her courage and her self-control.

“*You* can ask this when I’ve shown such trust in you as to tell you of my disappointment! Mr. Masters, it is time, indeed, that I should take Trixy away from Thorncot.”

CHAPTER III.

A strong vein of healthy affectionate excitement runs through the Beecher household the day on which the Harold-Floyds are expected at Thorncot. The consciousness that she is soon about to quit it makes Mrs. Beecher more desirous than ever that her house shall put on its fairest aspect for her step-daughter and her husband. Finishing her writing an hour earlier than usual, she goes through all the rooms with Trixy, regulating the sunbeams, and admitting only just so much light as shall soften and subdue, and cause all things to look at their best. Huge pots of mignonette, half hidden in folds of filmy white muslin curtains, inter-

cept the light air that comes stealing in through the open windows, and perfume it as it fills the house. Mephistopheles, the white Russian terrier, has been washed, and Faust, the grey Angora cat, has been brushed for the occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Vesey, the squire-parson of Holton and his wife, have been asked to meet the Floyds at dinner. Indeed, long before the visitors can possibly arrive, all that remains to be done is, as Trixy says, to "make the best of ourselves, mamma, and to polish up our interest in something outside Holton and the Holtonites."

Shortly after this declaration Trixy finds, to her dismay, that there is something besides this still to be done—that there is in fact, the hardest part of her appointed day's work to be got through now at the last, when she thought that all that was required of her was to let "herself go" as it were, and be merely her freest and most delightful self.

The fact that a fresh burden is to be

laid upon her dawns upon her as she stands outside the drawing-room window under the verandah, watching for her sister and talking to her mother, who is in the room half-hidden by the curtains, enjoying the spectacle of Trixy's bright vigorous beauty bathed in the soft light of the dying day. Miss Beecher has thrown off all anxiety concerning Edward Masters and his claims upon her, for nothing has been said about him since her birthday.

But everything comes back to her with a confusing rush as she looks up at the sound of wheels on the drive and sees the young doctor driving rapidly towards her in his dog-cart.

With every limb trembling with agitation, with a heightened colour, and a light that may be either love or arrogance in her eyes, Trixy springs into the room.

"What *shall* we do?" she says, holding the curtain back and pointing to the rapidly-approaching object of interest. "It won't be like you not to ask him to dinner,

and Harrold and Ada have never heard of him."

In a moment Mrs. Beecher makes up her mind not to make him of importance by any display of anxiety or arrogance.

"What of that, dear?" she says quietly. "They have never heard of any of our county-town neighbours. I shall ask him to dinner, Trixy, and don't let me find that you allow yourself to be dazzled by Harold Floyd out of being as polite and agreeable as you know well how to be to Mr. Masters."

As she says this, and before Trixy can ask if her mother is joking or not, Mr. Masters comes into the room, and Mrs. Beecher rises to meet him with a gracious suavity that makes him doubt that she can be the same woman who repulsed his spoken love for her daughter so hotly and harshly. He does not realise yet that this fascinating, charming woman, who avows it to be her chief object in life to further the name she has already made in literature,

is in reality a mother keenly alive to every advantage and disadvantage which may befall her child, and that she makes all her own gifts subservient now to that child's welfare. For Trixy's sake she will make herself bewilderingly pleasant to the young aspirant, whose aspirations, for all that pleasantness, she will never countenance.

"My other daughter and her husband will be here presently," she says, pre-supposing that he knew they were coming this day, in a way that sets him thinking of the manner of the *Court Circular* on the movements of the Royal Family; "stay and dine with us, out of kindness to Mrs. Floyd and me, for Trixy always monopolises her brother-in-law."

"I shall have great pleasure in staying," he says gallantly, though he knows well that the pain of that coming evening's experience will far outbalance the pleasure. But he is resolved that Mrs. Beecher shall not lift him at her will, and put him down on a platform so far below Trixy that she

will appear to him unattainable. "I shall have great pleasure in staying, and I think you will see to-night that Trixy and her brother-in-law are not allowed to monopolise each other to the exclusion of everybody else. What do you think, Trixy? Do you think that I shall resign my place to Mr. Floyd, or to anybody else for that matter?"

His manner is easier, more assured than they have ever seen it before, and both Trixy and her mother feel aghast. The latter does not look it though. In pitting himself against this loving mother, who is also a clever woman of the world, Mr. Masters is either ignorant, or forgetful of the fact that she always wears a mask, unless *her own heart* is touched. In short she is too unselfish to be circumspect for herself, but she is at the same time too affectionate not to be circumspect for Trixy.

"I've just been telling Trixy that all social monopolisation is in bad taste," she

says, laughing. "You will find, I hope, that she has profited by my injunctions. It's the safest doctrine to inculcate," Mrs. Beecher adds, as Trixy goes out of the room to be ready to welcome her sister, who is fast driving up to the door. "Girls who are taught to generalise—to be universally agreeable—are less liable to be detrimental to themselves and other people than those who are impressed with the absurd notion that there must be a meaning and a motive for every variation in their manners."

"Mrs. Beecher is as determined to kill and bury the past—of which I fancy she knows very little—as I am to keep it alive and flourishing," Edward Masters tells himself doggedly. "If I can induce Trixy to promise to stick to me it is only a question of time and my strength against her mother's."

He does not feel particularly happy or at ease—in fact, he does not feel at all like a winning man during the next half-hour. The Floyds come in, full of

life, excitement, and prosperity. The already distinguished Queen's Counsel is a still young and handsome man, and there is about him that air of assured success and of utter and perfect confidence in himself which, without being offensive or aggressive in the smallest degree, does at the same time impress people with the idea that the man knows his own weight in the social scale to a nicety. His wife—the Ada whom Trixy is looking forward to having as guide, philosopher, and friend, in London—is a bright, beautiful little woman, who, without having lost a single charm of her girlhood, has about her a considerable portion of the more seductive charms of young matronhood.

Proud of the brilliant position her husband's brains have made for him, and showing her pride freely, partly because she is really fond of him, and partly because his career is doing justice to her choice of him out of the number of men who had attempted to rival him—proud of her

own perfect capability of bearing her part admirably in sustaining that position—delighting in the admiration which is always freely rendered up to her—delighting in an equal degree in that perfect confidence which her husband has in her, which permits her to avail herself of that admiration to a degree which women who can't command it dub "dangerous," though they cannot bring it in as "disgraceful"—Ada Floyd is (within ten minutes of his knowing her) pronounced by Mr. Masters to be "as detrimental a person to Trixy" (as far as his interests are concerned) "as Fate could have her in contact with."

Fortunately for his own immediate peace of mind he does not hear the brief conversation which takes place between the two sisters before dinner while Mrs. Floyd is dressing.

"Mamma won't be angry, will she? Harold has asked a cousin of his to come down here to-morrow and stay for a few days. Harold thought that even if

you were full at Thorncot, he could put up at some hotel at Holton," Mrs. Floyd says, just before they go down.

"Mamma won't be angry, of course, and equally of course Harold's cousin will find that there is plenty of room for him at Thorncot. Who is he?"

"Sir Roland Byng. I know very little of him, for he's been away with his regiment, either abroad or at the Curragh, ever since I married, but now his uncle is dead and he has come into the property; so he has sold out and means to be in town a good deal, I believe."

"Oh!" Trixy says, indifferently, as they prepare to descend.

"Harold and Roland Byng were brought up like brothers, and there's a great traditional affection subsisting between them," Mrs. Floyd chatters on as they make their way to the drawing-room, "but he hasn't half Harold's brains—not half. He was all very well for the army, and he'll do for

a baronet, but he never would have done for the bar."

"We are not likely to meet with another man in a hurry who has half Harold's brains," Trixy replies. Then, as she asks for no further information respecting Roland Byng, Mrs. Floyd finds herself unable to utter the few cautionary words she had intended uttering. It had been in her mind to say to Trixy, "Roland Byng always makes women like him, but he is not a marrying man." However, Trixy does not make the opportunity for the words of warning to be spoken, and Mrs. Floyd very rightly feels that if they are spoken irrelevantly they may make a deeper impression than she designs. Accordingly, she decides on leaving the future to take care of itself, and trusts to Trixy's subtle intuition to save her from surrendering her heart and taste without sufficient cause to the fascinating ex-soldier.

"How delicious it is to be able to slip out through the window and stroll about in

the moonlight with nothing on your head," Mrs. Floyd says later in the evening, when they are back in the drawing-room, and suiting the action to the word, she walks out under the verandah, and the others saunter out after her. At last Edward Masters feels rewarded for the patience with which he has endured the sensations of all outsiders in the society of this bright family group throughout the evening. At last he has a chance of gaining a private hearing from Trixy. A shade that is deeper than would be caused by the mere effects of the moonlight settles down on Mrs. Beecher's forehead as her daughter loiters just out of ear-shot with the young country surgeon—a shade that is perceived and understood by Mr. Floyd.

"Ada's sudden fancy for moonshine was inopportune—wasn't it?" he mutters, going nearer to Mrs. Beecher. "I don't quite understand the case yet. Why do I find him domesticated here, if you don't like it?"

"I don't quite understand it myself, though Trixy is the soul of candour," she answers, with a smile that chases the shade away. "There is something—something that Trixy is sorry for, too, I think; but whether it's merely an idle fancy on her own part that she feels now it will be desirable to kill, or a hope that she has raised thoughtlessly, or a childish promise that he has won from her, I can't tell."

"He's not a bad fellow in his way," Harold Floyd says: "he means work, and he has ambition."

"I am sorry to hear that," Mrs. Beecher replies, frowning again; "he ought to be contented with Holton and what Holton can offer him. I don't want to have to point out to either of them the incongruity there would be in the realization of his hopes about Trixy, but they must both feel it."

"She'll feel it fast enough as soon as she has seen other fellows," Mr. Floyd says lightly.

Meanwhile Trixy and Edward Masters are having one of those subdued private conversations that are so infinitely dear to him, and that are beginning to be infinitely embarrassing to her. Not that she likes him less than she ever did, but his presence fore-shadows trouble to her, and like a girl she longs to avert it.

"Will you feel glad or sorry when the day comes for you to leave Thorncot?" he asks.

"How can you ask? It will be all sorrow for me that day. I love the place, though I shouldn't like to be tied to it always; but I do want to feel that it's my home whenever I like to come to it. If I were clever like mamma, I would work day and night to make money enough to keep it."

On the spot he registers a vow that he will make money enough to get it back for her.

"Mamma, to my surprise, seems glad to go," the girl goes on, "and I dare say I

shall like the change to London life after a bit; but just now I dread the break-up. You *won't* like the people who come after us—will you?"

I shall not be here to like them or dislike them."

"Edward!"

"It's true, dear; my obscurity puts a gulf between us, Trixy, in the eyes of your mother. I mean to emerge from that obscurity, and I can't do it in Holton."

"Then you'll leave Holton for my sake, you mean?"

"I shall do everything for your sake," he says fondly, and the girl heaves a regretful sigh.

A little feeling of annoyance is reigning in Mrs. Beecher's heart and is observable in her manner as Mr. Masters comes and takes up his station by her side. He is quite conscious of it, and perfectly undismayed. Mrs. Beecher has permitted him to know that she is opposed to his union with her daughter; therefore he has little or nothing to gain

from her he tells himself. Even the few interviews with Trixy before her final departure from the neighbourhood of Holton, which he might secure if he feigned to fall in with her mother's views, are not worth the sacrifice of one jot or tittle of his liberty of action and audacity of intention. Mrs. Beecher is wronging him by mentally accusing him of pursuing a mean and underhand course of conduct. His first words to her prove that she is doing so.

"I have just been telling Trixy what I have not had an opportunity of telling you yet. I am going to leave Holton, and have a fight for fortune and—a few other things—in a wider field."

"Going to leave Holton! What infatuation!" she says, with derision, for she knows well what he means her to understand by this statement of his resolution. "Come in and talk it quietly over with me," she adds, as she walks back into the room and beckons to him to follow her.

He takes his seat on a low chair by her side, and begins his explanation.

"I carry my prospects with me wherever I go in the shape of my brains and experience, you must remember. I may as well invest these in some other place where the returns will be quicker than I can hope for them to be here."

"Your brains and experience are portable properties—your practice is not."

"I shall sell this and buy another."

"And what sort of a London practice do you imagine the proceeds of this will procure for you? I am going to try and forget that I am Trixy's mother, and speak to as your friend. You will be leaving peace, eventual prosperity, and a respectable and assured position, in leaving Holton merely to enter upon a life of struggle, possible failure, and ultimate disappointment. Don't think me a bird of ill-omen when I tell you that you're going to fight a battle for an idea which will never be realized."

"Thanks for your advice," he says drily; "but I can't help thinking that you're speaking much more as Trixy's mother than

as my friend. However that may be, I have made up my mind to leave Holton, and I generally carry out my plans when once I have made them."

"I am sorry for you, and I pity your sisters most profoundly. They have made many sacrifices for your advantage, and now you're apparently determined to make their sacrifices null and void by throwing away the advantages you are enjoying; but a wilful man will have his way."

"I am glad, at any rate, that you recognise that truth. You'll allow me to call on you and report progress sometimes when we're all settled in town, I hope?"

"To call? Yes, to call certainly. How could you suppose for an instant that I should hesitate to grant an old friend such a trifling favour as that? But you will have very little time for casual visiting, Edward, and I shall be a busier woman than ever. We shall not be able to afford ourselves the luxury of much of each other's society."

The words are polite, and the manner

frankly friendly, but for all that Edward Masters feels that they are designed to show him that his intercourse with Mrs. Beecher and the daughter of and for whom she is so proud will be very strictly limited for the future.

"Thanks for the permission," he says quietly. "No, I hardly did you the injustice of supposing that you intended to forbid your house to an old friend like myself. Still, as your manner has changed to me very much lately, I thought I'd better make sure of my ground."

"Has Trixy told you that we expect another visitor to-morrow?" she asks, disregarding his remark as to her changed manner. "A cousin of Mr. Floyd's is coming to us for the first time, and I'm feeling already that he will be a difficult man to amuse."

"He ought to be happy enough here," Edward Masters says enviously; "but if I can be useful—if I can drive him about and show him the country—"

Mrs. Beecher can hardly suppress a laugh at the *naïve* ignorance displayed by this offering of the sort of amusement that would be likely to be congenial to a man of Sir Roland Byng's order. But she restrains herself out of respect for its innate good-nature.

"Thank you, no. I don't think I shall make any efforts on his behalf," she says cordially. "Indeed, from a word or two Mr. Floyd has said, I fancy that the sooner he gets tired and goes away the better I shall be pleased. A course of comparative inattention, roughing it, and monotony will be at least a novelty to a spoilt child of fortune."

"Is he young or old?"

"About Mr. Floyd's age, or a little younger, I believe. Just the type of man who is deadly uninteresting to me—a soldier who cares so little for his profession that he leaves it directly he comes into a good property."

"Are you speaking of Roland Byng?"

Harold Floyd asks, sauntering in at this juncture.

"Yes, my dear Harold, I was uttering rank heresy about your cousin, I confess. The truth is I dread the introduction of a military swell into my household. A regular society man he will be, I'm sure, who will be terribly out of place in a little country house in which there are no country-house amusements."

"People don't generally find Roland Byng deadly uninteresting—do they Harold?" Mrs. Floyd puts in.

"No; and the mother will be the first to discover mines of talent in him which have been hitherto unsuspected and unworked," her husband replies. "You're given to that sort of thing—aren't you, Mrs. Beecher?" the privileged son-in-law goes on. "You have developed two or three 'mute inglorious Miltons,' if I remember rightly, and wasn't it last year that you dug out a second Sims Reeves from a rural music-hall?"

"I never discover what doesn't exist.

For example, I detected 'promise' in you long before Ada did," Mrs. Beecher answers, and while this laughing conversation is going on, Mr. Masters has found time to say to Trixy—

"Go and see my sisters the day after to-morrow, at four. I shall expect to find you there."

His tone is more authoritative than pleading; nevertheless Trixy is sufficiently influenced by it to promise to do as he bids her.

"I tell you what it is, Ada," Harold Floyd says to his wife from his dressing-room the same night, "the *mater* might do a worse thing than to let Trixy marry Masters."

"Oh! he's not at all the style of man for Trixy, Harold. I'm sure I hope she will do better than that."

"So do I, but she's very likely to do worse," Mr. Floyd responds. "He means to make his mark—I'm sure of that."

"An unformed country surgeon! I can't bear to hear you countenancing the idea—her

marriage with him would separate her virtually from us."

"Trixy likes him, too, and she may do a great deal worse," Mr. Floyd goes on, disregarding his wife's remark. "He's a quiet, sensible, nice fellow, and your mother may just as well withdraw her tacit opposition."

"You trust mamma for managing for the best, both for Trixy's happiness and prosperity. It is unnatural to expect her to quietly acquiesce in her own daughter making a match that is inferior in every way to her step-daughter's. I wonder self-esteem doesn't make you more sympathetic with mamma's perfectly quiet, well-bred antipathy to the Masters scheme."

"Well," Harold Floyd rejoins, in a tone that implies that the subject does not hold a sufficiently potent charm for him to continue conversing upon it any longer, "the time will come for Masters as surely as for any other man who has the right sort of stuff in him, and when it comes your mother will bitterly lament her mistake

inwardly, whatever she may do outwardly."

"You may safely trust mamma to do what is best for Trixy in every way," Mrs. Floyd says; and here the conversation regarding Mr. Masters's love and aspirations end for this night only. For it is doomed to be renewed many a time and oft among those to whom Trixy is dear, before it is finally laid to rest satisfactorily.

* * * *

"You may expect to see Trixy Beecher here to-morrow about four o'clock," Edward Masters says, coming abruptly into his sisters' sitting-room the next day while they are at tea, about five in the afternoon. "She promised me last night that she would come."

"Were you at Thorncot again last night?" Miss Masters questions, with an emphasis on the "again" that makes the man who knows how little he has gained by going there smart.

"It happened so," he answers carelessly.

"I called in just by chance, and Mrs. Beecher asked me to stay and dine and meet Mr. and Mrs. Floyd."

"Ah! the other daughter and her husband," Miss Felicia puts in, with evident curiosity. "One hears *so much* of them, and one *never* sees them. What do you think of them, Edward?"

"Do you hear much about them? I don't," he says curtly. "As for what I think of them that's of very little consequence." Then he goes on inconsistently to add that he thinks Harold Floyd is a "straightforward, nice fellow, who fully deserves the good place in the world which his undoubted power and ability have won for him, and that Mrs. Floyd is what the wife of such a man frequently is—a vain, arrogant, overbearing, scheming, worldly little woman."

"Dear me! and Trixy is so fond of her!" Felicia says, regretfully.

"Then depend upon it her influence over Trixy will be very bad indeed when the

Beechers go up to London," Miss Masters says, with solemnity, and both the sisters proceed to mention that this, or something very much like this evil, which is darkly limned forth, is what they have feared ever since they heard of Mrs. Beecher's determination to quit that haven of rest—Thornecot.

They do this in a way to which Edward Masters has been accustomed from his earliest youth, but the way has never worried him until now. Far from being gratified at their prompt unreasoning acceptance of his judgment of Mrs. Harold Floyd, he is annoyed by it. For Mrs. Harold Floyd belongs to Trixy, and he does not admit the right of any other human being than himself to cavil at or distrust any, even the most remote, of Trixy's belongings.

"Because I don't happen to like a woman it's no reason that she should be cast for the part of the evil genius of Trixy's life. You women leap at the most absurd conclusions on the most insufficient grounds. Trixy isn't a bit of soft clay, to be moulded by any

fool's hands into whatever shape he or she pleases. She has a will of her own, and plenty of sense to guide it."

"I'm sure of that, Edward, quite sure," Felicia says eagerly, "and if it come about that she has you to aid her we shall all be very proud of her. I'm *sure* of that."

Again most ungratefully it grates upon him that his sisters should put forth their opinion of Trixy as if it were of importance to her, even though it is commendatory.

"She doesn't need any aid or guidance from us at present," he says stiffly, "and even if she did I am not in a position to give it. Let me beg you, when she comes here to-morrow, not to lay so much stress on trifles; she is not accustomed to that sort of thing."

He speaks with a degree of sharpness to which his sisters are unaccustomed from him, and they cast piteous looks of interrogation at each other as to the cause of it. They never for an instant doubt that they are to blame in some way or other, for that

Edward's judgment is perfect, though his temper has always been a little stern, is and has been a fixed article of faith with them, from the hour when Edward first made manifest these qualities in an infantine but determined way. From their position at the tea-table in the centre of the room they do not see a possible cause for the caustic speech pass by in the shape of the Thorncot pony-carriage, driven by Harold Floyd, and containing another gentleman, whom Edward Masters, standing at the window, rightly judges to be the Roland Byng of whom mention was made the night before by Mr. Floyd while the parting cigar was been smoked.

The glimpse of the stranger which Edward Masters had caught had been of the briefest description, for the pony was travelling at the rate of fourteen miles an hour, but it had been enough to show him that the coming guest to Thorncot was a young, fine-looking man, with the unmistakable something in his air which Edward Masters was begin-

ning to realize that he himself lacked. There is no regret for his own want of it mingled with the knowledge that social circumstances have denied it to him. He is not a man to despise that world of hard training, of self-denial, of the experiences only to be gained in the ugly and suffering paths of life, of never-ending work, in which his has been formed. But it makes him wince to feel that the "something" which is not born of such a career as his may be acceptable to the beauty-loving and lighter side of Trixy's nature.

CHAPTER IV.

"YOU'LL find my mother-in-law a very jolly woman; she's one of the people who do their best to make you happy in their houses, and doing that never bother either themselves or you any further as to whether they succeed or not."

Harold Floyd makes this remark to his cousin, Roland Byng, as they roll rapidly along the road between the Holton station and Thorncot, on the evening of Byng's arrival. It is almost the first mention of Mrs. Beecher—or, indeed, of any member of his wife's family—which Harold Floyd has made to his cousin.

"I like that kind of 'old dow,'" Roland Byng says, carelessly, and Harold Floyd is

so accustomed, both to Mrs. Beecher and his cousin Roland, that he does not think for a moment of explaining to the latter that the former is by no means the "old dow" a popular superstition invariably represents a mother-in-law to be.

"I want a rest," Roland Byng goes on ;
"and this seems to be just the place to come to for it. How long do you stay ?"

"I may have to go off to-morrow, but you can stay on and look after Ada," his cousin replies. Then he adds, with an amused smile—"What's been your hard work, old man, that you need a rest ?"

"All that confounded law business takes it out of a fellow who doesn't live and breathe and get his living by the law," Byng grumbles. "I haven't half liked leaving the old corps either, and it hasn't been too pleasant to be looked upon as a thief and a usurper by Miss Byng, because my uncle left the property to me and simply an annuity of two hundred a year to her."

"Who's Miss Byng ?" Harold asks.

“Haven’t you heard of her? I thought all the family had either made moans or shaken their heads over her before now. My uncle always called her ‘his ward,’ but there is strong presumptive evidence offered that she is his daughter; but instead of thinking herself jolly well off in having the two hundred per annum secured to her, she gives herself airs, calls herself ‘Miss Byng,’ and treats me as if I was a pretender to the family property and honours.”

“Did you find her at The Lordship when you went to it?” Harold asks lazily, for he is not interested by the story of the absurd pretensions of Roland Byng’s possible cousin.

“Yes, and by Jove! I left her at The Lordship when I came from it,” Roland Byng says, with a half-vexed laugh. “She had the flag hoisted the day I came away, and dressed herself grandly, and went down to the village for the first time since her father’s death, and told all the people that while she stayed there she would play the

part of lady of the manor properly, and never behave herself as the guest of a man who had stolen away her rights 'for a time.' "

"Strong-minded old maids are difficult to deal with sometimes; can't you compromise with her feelings—let her live on at The Lordship and keep the keys? You must have a housekeeper."

"She's not of the kind that one makes housekeepers of," Byng says brusquely; "but I've come down here for rest. Don't let us discuss my home troubles any more, and don't revert to them before your people. Just understand this, though, I have been staying at the inn in the village all the time. I've not insulted Miss Byng by forcing my presence upon her while she's been helpless to go."

"In fact, you have been more careful for her reputation than her father had been. Was this owing to her charms or to her want of them?" Harold Floyd asks drily, as they draw up at the door of Thorncote

and are welcomed by the three ladies who are waiting for them under the verandah. On the whole Roland is rather gratified at this interruption to the conversation. He has no desire to explain his refractory cousin any further to this legitimate member of his family.

“He wouldn’t understand her, or how I feel about her a bit, as he’s never seen her,” Roland Byng tells himself, “and I don’t want mistakes made about her if possible.”

They are out of the pony-carriage, doffing their hats to Mrs. Beecher and her daughters by this time, and lazy wonder lives in Roland Byng’s eyes at his hostess being so utterly different a person to that which he had pictured to himself. The bright, pretty, graceful woman has never carried her years more brilliantly than she is doing this evening, in the exquisite amber-hued toilette which suits her brunette complexion so well. It may be, too, that the half-light, and the languor that pervades the soft summer evening atmosphere, become her also. Or the

pleasure of greeting a new and unexceptionable-looking acquaintance, may have something to do with it.

"He is attractive in appearance," she tells herself; "he is wealthy—he is authenticated by Harold, who never makes mistakes, and if he is free will he not be more or less than man if he can resist being fascinated by my Trixy?" Mrs. Beecher is looking at her daughter as she thinks this. Trixy is welcoming the new-comer, and in her mother's eyes Trixy is looking her best.

"I hope you have come down here thoroughly prepared to be very dull and quiet, Sir Roland," Mrs. Beecher says to her guest half an hour after this, as they seat themselves at the dinner-table. "Trixy and I consider it unusual dissipation to have Harold and Ada with us. Their society puts us in what we imagine must be the 'whirl' so often alluded to by the *Morning Post* and *Court Journal* in their descriptions of fashionable life. Just imagine, therefore, how hopeless it will be for us to attempt to cater for your amusement."

Before he can protest that he is sure he will find the highest he has ever known in her society, Trixy strikes in—

“Hopeless to attempt to cater for his amusement! My dear mother, what are you thinking about? I’ll give you a list of the sources of it that you’ll find inexhaustible, and ready to your hand, Sir Roland. When you can’t get hold of either mamma, Harold, or Ada, or me, you will find Mephistopheles and Faust most agreeable companions; Pixie will carry you on his back, or draw your chariot-wheels into all the prettiest places in the neighbourhood and last, but not least, you can get by yourself whenever you like, without feeling that we are wondering whether you’re pleased or sad, or troubling ourselves in any way about you.”

“What more can the heart of man desire, Miss Beecher?”

“I don’t know, but it won’t get more here.”

“Yes, it shall, and shortly too, Trixy,”

Harold Floyd says; "a cigar round the gardens presently, with you for guide, will suit both Roland and myself: man is disinclined to talk occasionally when the cigar is good, and the soothing effects of it carry his mind back to happier hours, my dear; and in such a case innocent prattle such as yours has the effect of a purling stream on the ear: it falls with a soothing sound, and we needn't attend to what it murmurs."

"My mind won't be wafted back on the wreaths of smoke to happier hours, because I've never known any," Roland Byng says.

"Haven't you? Oh, you poor fellow!" Trixy says, with genuine pity.

"I don't see, mamma, why we should be excluded from the moonlight stroll to-night," Mrs. Floyd puts in.

"Do you give up the moon and the gardens to Miss Beecher and Harold as a rule, then?" Byng asks, laughing, and Mrs. Beecher feels a sensation of rising anger against her step-daughter as that lady answers—

“No; neither Trixy nor the moon has lured Harold off into the garden yet. We have only been here one night, you know, and last night Trixy was otherwise engaged. Weren’t you, Trixy?” *

Trixy is not ashamed either of her last night’s companion or occupation.

“Edward and I have walked about in these dear old gardens with a moon and without a moon too often to have excluded mamma and you by design from our walk last evening,” she says frankly, and a vexed expression flits over Mrs. Beecher’s face as she marks that their visitor is listening attentively to every word.

“We shall so soon leave all our Holton friends and acquaintances behind us for ever,” she says, with strong emphasis on the last two words, “that we must all be as sweet and nice to them as we can during the short time we are here. You will help us in the task—won’t you, Sir Roland? And, really, the being so does amount to ‘a task’ sometimes.”

"It's never a task to me," Trixy says stoutly; "and, as for leaving them behind 'for ever,' I, for one, don't believe that we shall do it, and I'm sure I don't wish to do it."

"And now we'll go into the drawing-room," Mrs. Beecher says, rising and smiling sweetly; but, though she smiles, she is almost finding it in her heart to be annoyed with her child for her untoward display of that very honesty and sincerity which Mrs. Beecher has most carefully cherished all through Trixy's life.

"If Ada could be spiteful, I should think there was spite in her introducing the subject of Edward Masters to-night the instant this other young man comes on the scene; but it's not in her to be spiteful, and so I must only blame the chance current which swept the conversation in his direction," Mrs. Beecher says to herself as she hovers about the drawing-room, lowering the lamps judiciously behind their pretty flower-painted shades, while her daughters stroll

up and down outside under the verandah. Presently she sits down at the open window and watches them. Both are so pretty, both are so graceful, and Trixy is so intensely "interesting" in her young untamed vitality that her mother may readily be forgiven as she gazes on the pair for thinking—

"Surely, as Ada won such a man as Harold, I am not presumptuously ambitious in thinking that my own child ought to 'do better,' as the world will call it, if Sir Roland should see her to be half that she is."

"How long they are over their wine, mamma!" Mrs. Floyd says, impatiently, coming up close to Mrs. Beecher, and leaving Trixy standing at some little distance. "That's the worst of Roland Byng; so I have always heard from Harold."

"What? That he's long over his wine?" Mrs. Beecher asks, laughingly.

"No; but that he doesn't care a bit about ladies' society. Not that he's a woman-hater; there are always hopes of a woman-

hater amending his ways, because his views are so extreme that he must amend them. But he's indifferent about their society."

"Perhaps he wears a talisman against the charms of the many in the shape of a genuine attachment to the one," Mrs. Beecher answers, with more interest in her accents than she is pleased with herself for betraying.

"Perhaps he does," Ada answers; "but, if it is so, one is led to suppose that 'the one' must be some one of whom he is ashamed, for even Harold has never heard of her."

"Hush, dear! They are coming out through the window," Mrs. Beecher whispers, and Mrs. Floyd looks round in time to see her husband and her husband's handsome cousin lounge up to Trixy and commence talking to her.

"They can't hear me," she says, in a low voice; "and I'll take the opportunity of saying it to you now, mamma, while the time is young. Don't ignore Mr. Masters's

claims on Trixy in the way you do persistently now. Harold thinks it unwise; and don't encourage Trixy in taking a fancy to Roland. I wouldn't have been the one to second the proposal that he should come here for the world if I had known what he was like. Why, *any* woman might be forgiven for falling in love with him."

She speaks rapidly, earnestly, affectionately. Even Mrs. Beecher's sensitive ears fail to detect the slightest touch of either spite or jealousy in her stepdaughter's tone. Nevertheless, the warning does not make the faintest impression upon Trixy's mother.

"My dear child," she says lightly, "the only one of the women about him now who can *possibly* suffer through him will probably win him long before she herself is won. Don't alarm yourself. You don't know Trixy as well as I do. If she should give him her heart, he will have pleaded hard for it, and will value it; but it's premature, indeed, to speak in this way. Come for a walk round the garden," she calls out,

raising her voice a little, and the others come up to her, and when some light wraps have been brought for the ladies, the five of them go out together, all talking as merrily and unconstrainedly as if Trixy's free spirit pervaded every one of them.

Edward Masters, coming home from a late visit to a dying patient this night, passes Thorncot grounds and sees them all walking about familiarly together. High above all the others Trixy's clear tones ring in his ears, but the voice that constantly responds to hers is a strange one to him.

CHAPTER V.

"IF he would come clattering along on horseback as he does so often, it would be nothing for me to pop my head over the hedge and tell him that I can't meet him at his sisters' this afternoon; but to write and send the note in by the groom is making such a business of it," Trixy Beecher is saying to herself the next morning, as she makes the ascent of the bank, crowned by a close-cropped hawthorn hedge, which divides the Thorncot gardens from the high road.

"Can I get anything for you, Miss Beecher?" a voice says just behind her, and looking round she meets Sir Roland Byng's glance. At the same moment she hears the sharp ringing trot of Edward Masters's well-

known sturdy cob, "King Cole," at some little distance up the road.

"Thanks, no—I was hoping to see a friend; and I hear him coming now;" and Trixy, utterly regardless of what Byng's opinion of her conduct may be, proceeds to wave the little flower-basket which she carries in her hand, as a signal that she wants him to stop, to the man who is riding.

The summons is unexpected, and "King Cole" is pulled up so sharply in his eighteen-mile-an-hour trot that he scuffles and kicks up the dust before he can finally settle to stand still and let his rider hear what Miss Beecher has to say to him.

"This is lucky, Trixy; I didn't hope even to see you till four o'clock to day," Masters says from his position below the hedge on the roadside; and Byng, from his position on the garden-path under the bank, hears the words, and instantly surmises that their utterer is the same person with whom Trixy had taken that moonlight stroll of which he had heard rather confused mention made.

Before he can walk away—for to do so is almost as awkward as to remain—Trixy is scrambling half-way down the bank to speak to him.

“Either come up on the bank, and let me introduce Mr. Masters and you to each other, or go on, Sir Roland, for I have to make a little apology to him.”

“Let me take you up the bank,” he replies, giving her his hand, and as soon as they are on the top Trixy mentions their respective names hurriedly to each other, and Sir Roland drops into the easy conversational tone a once.

“That’s a handsome cob you’ve got there; I’ll just walk round by the gate and have a nearer look at him if you’ll allow me,” and before Trixy can say a word to frustrate his kindly intention—which is to put an end to all possible embarrassment of which his presence may be the cause—he is down walking rapidly along the garden-path which leads to a gate into the road.

“That’s well done,” the girl says, ad-

miringly, "for I do want to speak to you, Edward, and I couldn't do it well before him; I—"

"Who is he?" Mr. Masters interrupts.

"Oh! he's Harold Floyd's cousin, came last night, you know; but I wanted to tell you that I can't—"

"Stand still!" Edward Masters ejaculates, angrily, to his cob, and for a moment Trixy is in doubt as to whether she shall make another attempt to offer her explanation or not. But the peace-loving spirit of the genuine woman prevails, and she perseveres.

"I waited here hoping to see you, for I want to tell you that I can't go to your sisters' this afternoon, Edward."

"I expected to hear that," he interrupts rather rudely. "Well, my sisters will be disappointed, but that is of little consequence."

"And you'll be disappointed, too—won't you?" the girl asks searchingly. "At any rate I am, and I'm not ashamed to confess it."

"The fulfilment of your plan must have been very dear to you since you give it up so readily. Don't try to make a smooth story of it, Trixy; it isn't worth while."

She sees that he is profoundly vexed, and her heart grows very soft to him, in spite of that hard injustice which his manner is dealing out to her.

"Do you know—yes, you *do* know—that to please you I would come and see your sisters and meet you any day, Edward; but it isn't pleasing to mamma that I should do so to-day. Don't try and make it harder for me; it seems impossible to please you both."

"The impossibility will strengthen if you let yourself be wafted about by every wind of doctrine in this way. You can't make up your mind which you want to please, therefore naturally you will not please either for long. At present I evidently am the one to be sacrificed."

"I want to please you both, but I have quite made up my mind that I will please

my mother while I can, Edward. You don't know yet what a darling she is."

"The day that I think her a darling will see a strange change come over Mrs. Beecher, Trixy. If she ever favour my claim on you, it will not be for love of either one of us."

She has no time to combat his opinion, for Sir Roland Byng comes up, and the two men fall into conversation about the merits of the cob. At the same moment Mrs. Beecher and Mrs. Floyd come in sight upon the lawn, and Trixy signals to them.

"Come down with your sister, Trixy," Mrs. Beecher cries. "I trusted to you to try at least to entertain Ada and Sir Roland this morning, and here I find you leaving them to their own devices—'for the sake of Edward Masters,' she is about to say, but she checks herself and substitutes the words—"listening to a conversation on a subject that would be, I should imagine, more interesting to the groom than to you."

"Good-bye, Edward; I'm summoned," the girl cries out, lightly, as she passes down

and puts her arm coaxingly through her mother's.

"See here, dear," she begins, pettingly, "I had to tell him that I couldn't go to his sisters', as I'd promised—yes, I *did* promise freely, mamma—this afternoon; wasn't it better to tell him over the hedge in that kind of way than to write a note? He would have had my written words of refusal to please him to look at for just as long as he chose to keep the note; but the spoken words he'll forget directly I see him again and am nice to him."

"Don't take that means of making him forget anything he may not like, Trixy."

"I must, mother dear; you say yourself that he has little enough happiness to expect through me in the future. Poor fellow, let him have the pleasure while I am near him of showing him that my wish at least is to make him happy now."

"Ada seems to find the time hang heavily on her hands," Mrs. Beecher says, as she hears her stepdaughter calling aloud through

the open window to her husband to "bring out a sunshade and a low chair for her."

"She wouldn't have been a bit better pleased if I had been ambling about all the morning, mamma," Trixy says, briefly. "She might have had the pony-carriage."

"Sir Roland has gone for a walk, I suppose? Ada and I sent up to his room to ask him to join us when we came out, and he wasn't to be found."

"He's out in the road talking to Edward. It is with him that Edward is having the discussion about King Cole," Trixy laughs. "Now, mother, do you still hold to your opinion that the conversation would have been more interesting to the groom than to me?"

"We will walk along the road and meet our guest," Mrs. Beecher says, without answering Trixy's remark. "It was hardly polite of you to come away from him so abruptly, Trixy. You ought to have told me he was there when I called you down."

"You knew that Edward Masters was there, mother."

"He scarcely can claim the same amount of attention at your hands that is due to this stranger, who is *my* visitor, Trixy."

"No, I won't go and meet him," Trixy says, resolutely, dropping her mother's arm. "It is just the very thing to annoy poor Edward more than he is annoyed already. Now, mamma, don't look surprised, or as if you thought he had no right to have any feeling of the kind. *I* sympathise with him."

"Trixy!"

"I do most thoroughly, and though I don't *want* to marry him, or to be engaged to him, or anything of the sort, I feel that he is not being treated well."

"You mean that I am behaving badly to him in not encouraging him to bind you down to a middle-class lot where you would only just escape poverty and wouldn't escape obscurity."

For a moment or two Trixy looks doubtful and harassed, then her face clears, and the lifelong habit of implicit reliance on her mother's judgment and affection resumes its sway.

"The best thing for us to hope is that he may get to care for some other girl, mother—"

"Or that you may get to care for some other man who will be worthy of you in every way," her mother interrupts.

"Dear me!" Trixy says, reflectively, gazing intently at her mother. "I wonder that it only dawns upon me now for the first time, but you are looking almost as young and quite as pretty as Ada this morning, and I shouldn't wonder if we have to reverse the positions when we get to London. I shall have to mount guard over *you* to see that you are not pursued by too many detrimental admirers, and that you don't let yourself be lured into any indiscreet intimacies with audacious young men who will build I don't know what ambitious hopes and expectations upon the graciousness of your manner. Yes, I shall be the duenna in future, and my post will be no sinecure."

The girl speaks in a spirit of the idlest fun—merely out of a desire to turn the conversation away from the topic of Edward

Masters and herself, for pretty and attractive as her mother is, the shadow of a doubt as to that mother being less than perfectly well contented with her solitary condition has never crossed her mind. It jars painfully on Trixy's tender feelings, therefore, when her mother replies sadly—

“Dear, I feel as strongly as you do that all possibility of anything of that sort is over for me, but I can't laugh about it as you do, Trixy.”

With wondering questioning eyes Trixy sees that a hot painful blush has risen to Mrs. Beecher's face, and that her eyes are filling with tears.

“And I've been the one to hurt her,” the poor child thought. “I who believed that a thousand men might seek in vain for a more charming excuse than she'd be for their falling in love and making geese of themselves. I have seemed to ridicule the idea of what would be the most natural thing in the world to me.”

“Mamma, here comes Sir Roland. Don't

let him see you with your eyes red," Trixy says aloud. "And do forgive me for having been an awkward goose, and we'll never get on the hateful subject again—will we?"

"Never with regard to me, Trixy," Mrs. Beecher answers, smiling away all traces of emotion; "but I am not to be disarmed so easily when you're concerned. There's the luncheon bell—how poor Ada must bless the sound of it as a break in the monotony of her morning!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE Lordship is a vast many-sided structure of strangely mixed architectural styles, picturesquely but unhealthily situated in the bosom of a closely-wooded, well-watered midland county valley. A Byng who was a well-favoured courtier of the Virgin Queen began it after the Elizabethan fashion regardless of expense, for a vain hope filled his heart that his royal mistress might honour and ruin him by sojourning in it in the course of one of her progresses. The hope was never fulfilled—the favour was withdrawn, and the funds fell low. Accordingly The Lordship was left half-built for future Byngs to exercise their taste upon.

In spite of incongruities—perhaps by reason of them—The Lordship is one of the pleasantness, prettiest places to be found in lovely Surrey even, which abounds with pleasant and pretty places. Its terraces and pleasaunces, its lawns and wildernesses, its artificial Italian, stiff Dutch, and genuine free and peaceful old English gardens are each and all charming in their way. So is its big pond that is never made pretentiously ridiculous by being called a lake—so are its roomy, airy, well-ventilated stables. So are the meadows that spread out from the belt of plantation that encircles the “homestead” as it were. Above all, so is the three-quarters of a mile of tan gallop, which has been laid down through these meadows by the late Admiral Sir Geoffrey Byng, for the pleasure and at the instance of his petted spoiled “ward” (as she has always been termed) Violet.

Violet Warrener Byng has been the presiding deity, according to some people, the evil genius according to others, of the

Lordship for the last four years. Her approach had not been very freely heralded. One morning the old admiral, according to his wont, went up to London by an early train. When he returned to his eight-o'clock dinner, Violet accompanied him. The housekeeper had been summoned and told that the "young lady was his ward, and was to be known as Miss Byng." He furthermore added that "the young lady was to be made comfortable in every way she pleased."

The desire to make their master's ward comfortable was one that was readily implanted and that quickly took strong root in the hearts of all the servants at The Lordship. The power of making her so was a more difficult matter, for Violet's caprices were innumerable, and her impatience to have them gratified was extreme. However, she won the suffrages of the household from the first day of her coming among them, and now, at the expiration of four years, she is more popular among

the servants and subordinates of the establishment than any one who ever bore the name of Byng, rightly or wrongly, had ever been before her.

She gained them at first, and she has kept their allegiance throughout her reign by a certain gay good-humoured but still most determined undauntedness that was strangely foreign to the bearing of all the ladies of the house of Byng who had gone before her. Ready as rumour was to assign the existence of a closer tie between the admiral and herself than that of guardian and ward, Violet's personal dissimilarity to that patrician race caused even rumour to repeat herself faintly and doubtingly. The Byngs were all tall, slight, aquiline-featured, and cool. Violet is rather short, fully-formed, the fairest, bonniest-faced, most ardent-natured little creature altogether that the sun has ever shone upon. All her faults—and their name is legion—are on the careless, reckless, generous side. All her affections are

"pure womanly." The will that decrees that The Lordship is to be her home no longer is regarded as cruel, arbitrary, and unjust by all the illogical women of the establishment, from the housekeeper down to the kitchen-maids. As for the grooms and stable boys, they openly report themselves to be ill-pleased with the arrangement that gives the power which has been hitherto vested in Miss Violet's hands into those of the new master, Sir Roland. Grieved, heart-sick, indignant as she is at the necessity which turns her out, Violet's vain little heart throbs with gratification at the open manifestations of preference for her over Sir Roland which are displayed. Yet it must be admitted that in that same heart there lurks a certain amount of admiration for the man who has been legally deputed to oust her, and to herself at least she confesses that he is far more worthy to bear the family honours than she is herself.

It is just twelve o'clock, and the June

roses are hanging their heads a little under the influence of the burning rays of the noonday sun. Violet does not droop under, or shrink from them, however. She basks in them as contentedly and happily as the cats and dogs who are stretched out supinely on many a burning window-sill and golden-tinted bit of green-sward. She has been to the tan ride, giving a young horse a little schooling, and now she stands out on a terrace in the glare, in her habit still.

The fair frank face is fortunate in the possession of a white thick skin that does not flush or become embrowned when exposed either to scorching rays or flaming fires. Nor does it chap or spray when subjected to either bitter frost or rasping east winds. The bluish grey eyes are well opened and set rather wide apart under the wide, well-formed brow. The mouth is wide, well-cut, smiling, and honest. The nose is indescribable, being neither aquiline, straight, nor pug. For all that, it is very pretty.

Her figure is rather strong and sturdy than graceful, but her bust, hands, and feet are perfect. The beautifully turned ankles and tiny highly-arched feet are done full justice to by the superbly-fitting Hungarian riding boots, and the minute white hands might command the homage of kisses from an emperor.

She is evidently waiting for some one, and as evidently that some one comes in sight presently, for Violet's face lights up with pleasure, and she begins kissing her hands and nodding frantically in the direction of one of the side walks. The next moment she jumps down the balcony steps, runs across a corner of the lawn, and flings her arms gushingly round the neck of a tall, straight, hard-featured young lady with tow-coloured hair, whom she greets as her "own dear Mary."

"I didn't wait a minute after getting your note, Violet," the visitor begins explaining eagerly. "I said to papa that everything must give way to your claims on me to-day.

My sweet friend, am I to lose you so soon ?”

As Miss Mary White asks this question she makes a peck at Violet’s smooth cheek with the hard lips that are drawn so tightly over the high teeth, and her tow-coloured ringlets float over Violet’s well-habited form. At once, in spite of the effusive nature of her own greeting to her “own dear Mary,” Violet’s sense of humour is tickled by the overdone enthusiasm, and she laughs out quite candidly at her guest.

“Don’t be lachrymose, Mary; I’ve a good many more days here yet, and when I am turned out of The Lordship, I shan’t go to quite the uttermost end of the earth; but come in, and I’ll show you Sir Roland’s letter.”

“How does he address you ?”

“As a gentleman should address a lady,” Violet says laconically; “but I’ll show you,” and she leads the way into the house and into a pretty boudoir that opens with French windows upon a beautifully-arranged rose-

garden. An open letter is lying upon one of the little ebony-legged velvet-covered tables, and this she picks up and reads aloud.

“MY DEAR MISS BYNG,—

“How stiff!” Miss White exclaims, in accents of exaggerated disgust, “when he must know, as well as you do yourself, that you’re his own real cousin.”

“If he were ten times as certain of the fact as I am myself, it would be impertinence on his part to call me anything but Miss Byng,” Violet says holding her head up royally; but don’t talk any more, and I’ll read you what he says.” So saying she begins the letter again, and Miss White listens with an amount of absurd attention that is exquisitely funny to Violet, who has a rich vein of contempt running through her affection for her friend.

“As I am by the death of my uncle placed in the position of your ‘nearest friend,’ it strikes me that it is just as well that we should as soon as possible come to a cordial

and clear understanding. The terms of my uncle's will are very lucid. He desires, as you can no longer reside at The Lordship, that I am to find a suitable home for you—such a home as I should secure for a sister, if I had one. No one grieves more than I do at the necessity which exists for removing you from a place to which you have become attached as you have to The Lordship. At the same time no one knows better than I do that your sense of what is fitting must make you anxious to be established elsewhere, as I am *not* the brother I would gladly be to you.

“Fortune has favoured me in respect to finding you the suitable home. The friend I am staying with, Mrs. Beecher, is a connexion of my own through her daughter's marriage with my cousin, Harold Floyd. She has consented to receive you as soon as she is settled in her house in London. But before I try to win your assent to living with her, you shall make her acquaintance on your own ground—that is to say, I will

induce Mrs. Beecher to become my guest at the Lordship when I return to it, as I hope to do in a week or two. Trusting that by bringing her I shall insure a welcome for myself from you, and assuring you that your welfare and happiness are of the greatest possible interest to me, I remain, my dear Miss Byng, yours very sincerely,

ROLAND BYNG."

"There?" Violet says, interrogatively, as she finishes it.

"It's not a letter that I like," Miss White says dubiously, feeling that she is expected to say something, and not exactly knowing what kind of comment will be agreeable to her young friend.

"Why not? Nonsense!" Violet says sharply. "It's just the kind of letter that I like, and you're very absurd to try to cavil at it. What should he say? He couldn't come here respectably alone while I'm here; you know that—or at least you ought to know it. It's just the letter he ought to have written, and it's just the letter that I like."

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APTER VII.

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"I hope that you may never be disappointed in your expectations concerning him, Violet," Miss White says with solemn severity, shaking her head the while as if she would be understood to negative the idea of expecting any good thing to come out of Sir Roland Byng himself. "I hope that he may prove as true and good a friend to you as some of those whose opinions you *scout*."

"Oh, mercy!" Violet cries with a mock deprecatory shrug, "There you go again, trying to monopolise all the good feeling in the world concerning me. I'm tired of being moaned over; I'm tired of being told I'm a martyr and a heroine, when I *know* I'm only a shallow little pretender to either position; in fact," the girl winds up passionately, "I'm tired of kicking against the pricks. *Don't* try to make me dissatisfied again."

"It's only natural that you should give us all up for Sir Roland Byng," Miss White says bitterly, her head quivering with sup-

pressed excitement. "What are we? Humble friends whose sole claim is for your happiness. If you think it will be secured by your leaving The Lordship, and going to live with this *intimate* friend of Sir Roland Byng (he makes no mention of her having a husband you may observe), why, then, go by all means."

"Now, Mary," Violet says dispassionately, "you have been asking me to leave The Lordship and go and live with you for the last six weeks. Why shouldn't I go where my cou——, where Sir Roland Byng wishes me to live?"

"We are only humble people, and you're quite right, Violet, to throw us over the very minute you get *your cousin*—as you're so proud of calling him—to notice you. May it be for your happiness—that's all I say, and I'm sure it's all papa will say when he hears of this. But I doubt it. I'm older—a little older—and I have seen more of the world than you, and I doubt it."

“You make me distrust *everybody*,” poor Violet says with a gulp.

“Oh! pray don’t let us do that. We hope—for I’m sure I may speak for papa as well as myself—that you will find this Mrs. Beecher all that she ought to be; and as for Sir Roland Byng!—well, I won’t say what I think of his conduct; but I know what papa will say.”

“Your papa will never say it for Sir Roland to hear.”

Violet laughs carelessly, but she adds mentally, “Oh, dear! why have I said all I *have* said to Mary White?”

CHAPTER VII.

For the first week or ten days of Sir Roland's sojourn at Mrs. Beecher's house it is by Ada's side that he strolls about the grounds and down through Holton in the morning. While in the long dreary afternoons it is by him that Pixie, the pony, is driven about to all the various points as to which Mrs. Floyd desires to revive her recollections, for Harold has been suddenly summoned back to town.

No comment is made on this arrangement, but sometimes as the cousins by marriage go off together, it does strike Mrs. Beecher that the plan is scarcely a fair one to be pursued by the married sister towards the unmarried one. "Can it be possible that Ada

would grudge the higher position and the greater wealth to Trixy?" the mother asks herself. But she invariably scouts the idea away immediately, as being unworthy of Ada, Trixy, and herself.

And yet—"and yet" it is useless. She cannot blind herself to the truth. For some reason or other Ada does intervene to prevent Sir Roland Byng holding unfettered intercourse with either Trixy or Trixy's mother. That Mrs. Floyd does not do this with the unworthy motive of binding him in her own chains Mrs. Beecher is sure. But Ada's real motive is beyond her step-mother's ken, and the effort to divine it worries Mrs. Beecher considerably.

On her side Mrs. Floyd is also in a state of perplexity. For the first time in her bright, happy, unchequered life she is feeling heavily weighted by a sense of responsibility. She and her husband have been the means of bringing this man, who is so well fitted by nature and circumstances to play destruction with a woman's feelings,

into the Beechers' midst; and both the mother and daughter are women who are well fitted to feel the full force of his charm.

"Come back as soon as you can," she writes to her husband. "I am behaving disgracefully—walking, driving, and talking to Roland Byng from morning to night. You can't imagine what a strain it is. We are all at silent unobtrusive cross-purposes. He does not want me and he does want some one else, and they both want him, though up to the present moment mamma believes that she wants him solely for Trixy. I do wish with all my heart that the persevering young surgeon would play the part of young Lochinvar, and carry off Trixy with a dash. If he did that I could let the other affair alone to take its chance, with the sure conviction that mamma would never make a fool of herself. But as it is—bound up as they are in each other—if mamma and Trixy ever come to regard one another as rivals, however lovingly and generously

they may both behave, there will be misery."

Her husband's reply to this is not such as to encourage any further confidence on the subject.

"As to your fears for Roland's freedom, and your mother's and Trixy's feelings, they're the most absurd things I've ever known you nourish. In the first place, he's not the man to put himself in a ridiculous position for any woman, and I can imagine nothing more ridiculous than a fellow making love to December while May stands smiling by. Your mother is a good-looking, clever, attractive woman, but she *has had her day*, and she knows it. Don't see ghosts. Depend upon it, her apparent *penchant* for Roland is due to her motherly desire to see Trixy Lady Byng. In my own mind I think that Trixy's regard for Masters is deeper than any of you (Trixy herself included) imagine. Unconsciously she is swayed by his determination to sway her. Walk and drive, and talk to Byng as much as you like, but

give up playing the part of family guardian angel, and just let things take their course."

It may be due to the influence of this letter, or it may be that pretty Mrs. Floyd is thoroughly tired of playing her thankless part. At any rate she relaxes her vigilance this afternoon, and the result is that, almost for the first time since the morning after his arrival, Sir Roland Byng finds himself alone with Trixy.

"You are going for a walk," he says, catching her up as she is about to emerge from the grounds into the high-road; "may I come too?"

"Yes, if Ada doesn't want you," Trixy answers frankly. "I thought you were going to drive her, and mamma is making up accounts—so I am taking the opportunity of not being wanted by anybody, to walk into Holton to see the Masters."

He notes with satisfaction that the girl's tongue does not falter, neither does her manner become embarrassed at the mention of the name.

"The Masters! Has Mr. Masters any family? I didn't know he was married."

He knows perfectly well that Mr. Masters is not married, and that it is the maiden sisters to whom Trixy is making reference. But he also knows that, if a girl loves a man, careless mention by another person of the possibility of his marriage with any one else, is a grand crucial test.

"Married! No!" Trixy laughs, in a most reassuringly unconstrained manner as she speaks. "Of course he isn't married; don't you know that he wants to marry?"

She pulls herself up abruptly and crimsones with shame as she recollects that to finish her sentence will be to betray the confidence of the man who loves her so honestly and intensely.

"Let me go with you to call on his sisters, then," he says, relieving her embarrassment by taking no notice either of it or the unfinished sentence.

"They'll be overcome by the invasion so early in the day, but they'll be delighted to

see you all the same—you will be the tea-table topic for a little time in Holton.”

“They must have seen me often enough, for wherever Mrs. Floyd wants to drive, it seems to me that we pass through Holton to get to it.”

“Ah! but they haven’t seen you with me yet,” Trixy says. She is so thoroughly familiar with the country-town habit of speculation as to the probability of an engagement existing between any pair of young people who may chance to be seen together that she has not the smallest scruple in alluding to the subject to him.

“Oh! I see,” he says, looking down into her face searchingly as she walks by his side with that air of youthful free stateliness about her which is one of her most potent charms; that never occurred to me, to tell the truth. Perhaps I ought to offer to go back and leave you, since my escorting may cause freer remarks to be made than would be pleasant for you to hear; but I am

not going to offer to do it—am I very selfish ? ”

“ No, but very sensible.”

“ There’s no one to be hurt by the remarks if they are made ? ” he goes on questioning.

“ She is about to answer “ No one ” when she remembers Edward Masters, and her conscience pricks her ever so slightly as she reflects on the jealous pangs which will assuredly assail him if any remarks be made about Sir Roland’s attendance on her.

“ You don’t speak,” he says pleadingly. “ Tell me—won’t you ? Is there any one who will be hurt by the most likely of all possibilities being suggested concerning me ? ”

“ How pertinacious you are ! ” Trixy says impatiently. “ I am not coming to you with the story of all my vain imaginings.”

“ Then as you refuse to confide in me, I in turn shall reserve a confidence I was about to repose in you. I have spoken to

your mamma very seriously this morning, and she has said 'yes' to my proposal."

"What do you mean?" Trixy asks composedly, but her cheeks burn with blushes, he sees to his intense delight, and she looks so pretty in her attempt to preserve her childish dignity that he cannot resist teasing her a little more.

"It only remains for you to say 'yes' and the affair will soon be settled."

"Don't ask me," Trixy says, a spasm of loyalty towards Edward Masters contracting her heart as she speaks. "At least, don't talk nonsense to me. What is it?"

There is such unmistakable pain in her confusion that he drops his air of badinage in a moment and answers seriously—

"I want to bespeak your good will for a girl whom I am bound to look after, and one very difficult to deal with." Then he goes on to tell her as much as he sees fit to disclose of Violet's situation. Throughout his narrative he speaks of Miss Byng as his "cousin" and his late "uncle's daughter,"

and Trixy grows very thoughtful as she listens.

"Is she pretty?" Trixy asks when his statement comes to a conclusion.

"No—o—well, yes, rather piquant than pretty though, I should say. She rides magnificently, and when you see her on horseback she looks saucily seductive enough to steal any man's heart away."

"And she has no friends—at least, none but you, poor girl!" Trixy says in tones of heartfelt pity, in spite of her pulse beating more hurriedly as he makes this light but evidently meant mention of his cousin's saucy seductiveness.

"She has no friends who can be of any real service to her. I like her extremely—that is, I am intensely interested in her, but she regards me as a natural enemy because I've succeeded her father."

"It does seem very little money to have left her after letting her reign as you say she did at The Lordship. Yes, Sir Roland, all my sympathies are with her; I do pity

her very much indeed, and I don't wonder at her looking on you as her natural enemy.

"I shall be the best friend she has ever had in the world if I win your mamma and you to take her into your home and be like a mother and sister to her."

"Our house will seem so little and poor after The Lordship."

"In any event she must leave The Lordship; don't you understand?" Sir Roland explains impatiently. He cannot bear that any hitch should be suggested in the plan he has made for furthering his cousin's welfare. She has been a stumbling-block in his path from the hour of his uncle's death, and between his desire to do his very utmost of kinsmanlike duty to her, and his dread of being supposed by her to be more than kind, he has suffered a severe mental struggle.

"Mamma isn't too fond of having girls about her," Trixy goes on objecting. Somehow or other she has conceived an

aversion, not to Miss Byng, but to the idea of Miss Byng coming to be a part of their lives.

“Your mamma acceded to my request at once, subject to your approval. Say you will let her come, Miss Beecher. Let me write to her this afternoon and tell her definitely what she is to do with herself.”

“Here we are !” Trixy says, with a sigh of relief, as she turns up the steps that lead to the Misses Masters’ front door. “It shall be exactly as you wish—exactly. If mamma and you think it well, I should be an ungrateful girl if I didn’t say yes heartily.”

CHAPTER VIII.

"So you were all going away without beat of drum, Trixy, and I should have known nothing about it if I hadn't happened to look in to-day."

The speech is uttered in reproachful tones to a girl who listens to it half in penitence, half in pity. The speaker is Edward Masters—Holton's prosperous young surgeon.

"Ted—Ted! I do wish you wouldn't say things to me that I don't know how to answer. We are all going to stay a week or ten days at The Lordship, Sir Roland's place, in order that we may make the acquaintance of Sir Roland's cousin, Miss Violet Byng, comfortably. There was

surely no need that I should send a special messenger into Holton to inform you of that fact."

"You don't know what your going away for 'a week or ten days' means to me," he says sorrowfully; and Beatrice rebels against both his feeling and his expression of it, and still has an infinity of kindly sentiment towards him.

"Well," he says, presently, taking her hand, "I'm not wanted here now. You have the Floyds and the prospect of going away; but if ever you do want me, Beatrice, you'll send for me?"

"That I will."

Then they shake hands and part, and the girl wishes ever so gently that he "did not love her quite so much because she cannot answer to his meaning;" and the man, with a man's blind belief in his own unchangeableness, vows that "what he wants he will win, and what he wins he will keep fast for ever."

"I hope you haven't quite broken with

Edward Masters?" Mrs. Beecher says to her daughter when they are about to start for The Lordship.

"Broken with him! Mother, there is nothing to break, and you know it as well as I do."

"Sir Roland has turned your head a little. His attentions are as meaningless as they have been ill-timed. I am afraid," Mrs. Beecher goes on heroically, "that he is a mere male flirt."

"I can say this for him—he has never flirted with me," Beatrice says calmly; "and as I have only seen him with Ada and you, and Ada and you are out of the question, I can't profess to judge of his flirting propensities."

Mrs. Beecher looks at this daughter, who is the apple of her eye, and (to her credit be it told) renounces on that daughter's behalf a few sweet hopes which have been raised in her breast during the last few days.

"My child, if I can see you *his* wife, I

shall be the happiest woman in the world. You are right in saying he has never flirted with you—he means it.”

“Means what?”

“Trixy, I can’t talk to you when you’re in this mood!”

“And I can’t listen to you when you talk in this strain, mother dear,” Trixy says laughingly. “Sir Roland looks upon me as duty-bound to Ted, and I look upon him as in chivalry-bound to his ward, Violet.”

“What an insane notion to put in his head!” Mrs. Beecher says angrily; “you are no more duty-bound to Mr. Masters than——”

“We needn’t argue the point, mother,” Trixy says calmly. “If he belongs to Violet as entirely as I belong to Ted, there is something improper in hinting at any other arrangement.”

Mrs. Beecher gives a pitying glance at Trixy which, somehow or other, inclines Trixy to continue, though she has received

no answer to that last remark, which seemed to be conclusive.

"I don't quite see the necessity for my going to The Lordship either, mother; it's reasonable enough that Sir Roland should wish you to go and make Violet's acquaintance, as he contemplates her living with you for a time."

"And it's more natural that he should wish you two girls to know one another, since you will be companions," Mrs. Beecher interrupts. "I don't often exact obedience from you, darling, but in this instance I must insist upon your accepting Sir Roland's invitation, and accepting it willingly."

"It shall be just as you wish, mother dear, and perhaps it's just as well. The sooner it's over the sooner to rest."

And so it is finally settled, and Beatrice gives in her adhesion to the plan of visiting Sir Roland's ancestral hall with a readiness which her mother fancies bodes ill for the Masters' alliance.

But her mother does not hear a few words which pass between Trixy and Sir Roland an hour or two before their departure for The Lordship.

"If I had a house of my own, and asked you to come and visit me in it, I'd give you the greatest pleasure I could by inviting the person you most wished to see to meet you," the girl says; and he replies,

"If you invited me to visit you, you would secure to me that other pleasure under the head of the invitation. But what is your proposition meant to suggest to me?"

"That you should invite our old friend Mr. Masters to your house while we are staying with you," Trixy answers resolutely. "He has been a very tender and true friend to us ever since we have known him, and now it seems as if we were getting away from him, and I for one don't want to do that."

"And I for another don't wish you to do that," Sir Roland laughs. "Trixy, you've

got into my head a good deal, but you haven't intoxicated me out of all sense of what is due to your own perfect integrity yet. I'll ask your friend to The Lordship, and, though I don't want him, I'll ask him heartily because you think it right that I should do so."

So thus, without Mrs. Beecher's knowledge, it was settled by the two young people that Edward Masters should have a fair field, even if no favour were shown to him.

Violet Byng has made her preparations, and all is in good order to receive her guests—for that they are her guests more than his, Sir Rowland has led her to understand. She is drawn up in battle array against them almost unconsciously. To use her own expression, "It is abominable that her guardian didn't wait to see whether or not she wanted to stray before he appointed a watch-dog over her, would go quietly before he put her into a new breaker's hands and made her go into double

harness with a strange girl." But for all her antagonism to the proposed plan, she is bent upon playing the part of mistress of the house and lady of the land very prettily to these coming guests.

They are to arrive about five o'clock, and she has arranged to receive them in the big drawing-room, which is full of historical furniture and family portraits, and antique china and cobwebs, and traditions and other precious legacies of the past. She is determined to be all that is discreet and dignified, in order that they may be made aware, as delicately and as soon as possible, how superfluous they are as far as she is concerned. So she has an afternoon refection awaiting them in tea-pots and cream-jugs of Early English silver, and Oriental cracked china that is beyond price; and these are set forth on a low table which is covered with a crewel-worked cloth, worked by the useful hands of Miss Mary White, who is in attendance on the occasion. Altogether nothing can be more just, and refined, and

domesticated than the scene in which she proposes playing the part of leading lady, and she trusts that Sir Roland will perceive at once how needless these forthcoming female adjuncts are to her respectability. Even her dress she has ordered with this view, and the sombreness of its hue is only equalled by the precision of its lines.

It is a penance to the girl to be in the house at all this fair sunny afternoon, but she performs it bravely, disregarding all Miss White's efforts to stir her into verbal expression of her wrongs. Nevertheless, the hours lag, and she hails with enthusiasm a break in the monotony which is made by a person coming in to tell her that Jack Albe—a noted horse-dealer—has brought up one of The Lordship colts, which has been in his hands for some time, for her to try.

"Shall I have time to get into my habit, and try the colt, and be properly dressed again before they come?" she says to her

companion, and before that companion can offer an opinion, she adds, "I won't ride it. I'll just run down to the tan-gallop and see John try the colt, and be back here playing propriety by the time they arrive."

But when they arrive the fair little presiding deity of the house is not there, and when she comes back it is in a state of insensibility on a hastily-improvised stretcher. The high-bred colt has played her false at a railing over which he ought to have hopped with ease, and the long train of her dress has caught in a post, and pulled her out of the saddle. For the temptation has been too strong for her, and though she has refrained from putting on her habit, she has not been able to refrain from trying the colt. The one little false step from the path of rigid propriety she had told herself it would be well to pursue on this eventful day, combined with the one little false step on the part of the colt that ought to have known better, has brought about this bitter result,

that a bruised, and battered, and incapable Violet is presently brought before the pitying notice of the visitors, instead of the valiant young lady who was so well prepared to hold her own.

"Kindheartedness is its own reward undoubtedly, whatever virtue may be," Trixy says, tears struggling with smiles in her eyes, later in the evening, when Violet has been restored to her senses, and it has been discovered that the damage done to her physically is not irremediable.

"It wasn't kindheartedness on my part which induced me to invite Mr. Masters," Sir Roland replies. "I asked him to come because you issued your orders to that effect, and I am glad he was here to do what he has done for poor dear Violet; but there are other surgeons within hail, remember."

"You won't be grateful, though he has been of service to Violet, and though Violet is very dear to you," Trixy says incisively.

"I should be a brute not to be grateful to

him under the circumstances, and it's entirely an emanation of your own brain that Violet is very dear to me," he answers.

"Well, but isn't she now?" the girl persists. "When she was brought in on that hurdle you went all sorts of odd colours, and I saw at once how it was with you, and I don't wonder at 'it, for Violet is a darling, I'm sure, and I feel proud and glad that Edward Masters, who belongs to me, you know, has been of service to her."

"Your mamma tells me that he does not belong to you—that it's only your chivalrous feelings which permit him to press an imaginary claim upon you."

"Mamma is mistaken; she clings to the view of the case that I took on my last birthday; but I have learnt a lesson since then."

"And who has been your master?" he asks meaningly.

"Must it inevitably be a man who has

taught me to discern the false from the true?" she replies.

"Inevitably. No one woman ever learnt that bitterest and saddest of all lessons from another."

"It was a man—I'll acknowledge so much."

"And you have learnt the lesson since your last birthday, and your last birthday was only just passed when I had the honour of being introduced to you?" he says softly, and Trixy answers lightly,

"I have not told you anything about the course of instruction, remember. I may have been merely a looker-on—not a pupil. At any rate I have learnt this lesson well, and that is to thoroughly appreciate Edward Masters's stability. *Nothing* on earth would make him swerve from a faith he has once pledged."

"In other words, he will stick to you like a leech—as any other fellow would who had the good fortune to be in his position," Sir Roland says impatiently, and the blush

which his words bring to Trixy's face is not one of displeasure.

Day after day slips by at The Lordship, and still poor Violet is confined to the couch of pain. The accident is a bad one—the colt having fallen in landing in an awkward manner, and having further rolled on his rider in his efforts to get up. Violet's left arm is broken, and her shoulder is dislocated, but she bears both the pain and the enforced quiet with a patience and resignation that are a new feature in her character. And she has utterly ceased from all desire to put herself in opposition to these guests whom Sir Roland has brought home with him.

She is approaching convalescence now, and the couch of pain is anything but dreary. Trixy Beecher has established herself as head nurse, and is incessant in attendance. The duties of the post are not very onerous, for Violet is neither capricious nor exacting, and all labour is lightened by the willingness with which each pair of

hands in the household tenders its service. Moreover, the surgical part of the business has been done so efficaciously, and is attended to so unremittingly, that there is little left for a nurse to do.

"Tell the truth now, Violet," Trixy says to her one morning when they were left alone together, "didn't you hate us when you heard we were coming to have a look at you, and didn't you abhor the prospect of living with us?"

"No, I think I felt more curious than anything else, for I knew all along that I needn't live with you or with any one, unless I liked," Violet says.

"What! live anywhere in opposition to your guardian's wishes?"

"I could snap my fingers at them if I liked," Violet exclaims unguardedly; then she remembers something apparently, for she checks herself and adds, "Pray, *pray*, never hint that I have said this to *any one*—to *any one*, do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear, but what are you exciting

yourself about so? Mr. Masters will be needed if you put yourself out about trifles in this way."

"Oh! it's not a trifle. I mean don't think of what I've said—forget every word of it. My head is light, you know; of course in my sober senses I know I'm bound to obey my guardian."

"Violet, do you know I think your guardian will make obeying him a very easy matter. Don't shake your head—I feel sure of it—you'll be Lady Byng, and won't have to leave The Lordship at all."

Tears come into Violet's bright clear eyes—her mouth quivers with a painful emotion that can scarcely be called forth by Trixy's words. In reality the girl is struggling hard with a spirit that is goading her on to utter words that she prays for strength to keep back. She is being sorely tempted, but she comes out of the ordeal triumphant.

"I think I would like to be alone," she says gently. "I shall be happier and steadier when I've been an hour alone."

Trixy obeys the invalid's wish, kisses and leaves her, wondering a little "why Violet should try to throw dust in anybody's eyes about the affection she *must* feel for Sir Roland Byng. How could any girl be with him—be the object of his tender solicitude, as Violet has been lately—without loving him in return?"

"It's deceitful of her not to confess it," Trixy says impatiently aloud to herself, flinging down a book she has taken up in idleness as she speaks.

"Who is deceitful now, Trixy?" Edward Masters says, coming into the room as she speaks.

"Oh! why—a—Violet is," she answers in some confusion.

"That I'm sure she is not—she may have a thousand faults, but deceit isn't one of them."

"Then why doesn't she confess to being fond of Sir Roland?"

"Perhaps she is not fond of him!" he says curtly.

"*What* an absurd idea!" she replies, with such an amount of contempt for the suggestion enunciated that he feels himself staring at her inquiringly.

"Do you *really* think she's in love with him already?" he asks.

"My dear Ted, she has known him ten days—quite as long as she has known you, in fact, and you think yourself justified already in forming a very definite opinion about *her*," Beatrix says, with a toss of the head that is not scornful by any means, and that gives promise of such a wealth of sympathy and fellow-feeling that Edward Masters finds himself wishing that this graciously discriminating girl whom he has been seeking for his wife were his sister.

Meanwhile, Violet is employing her bargained-for hour of quiet in desperately hard work.

The poor little thing has only one arm and hand at command, but with these she is prepared to do gallant service. She totters

from weakness still. Nevertheless, she goes unswervingly from the couch from which she has been ordered by doctor and nurse "not to move," to an old-fashioned bureau which had always stood in Sir Geoffrey's room during his lifetime, and with a little key she opens the top of it, and takes out a letter and an official-looking document. The letter she re-reads for the fiftieth time, and when she has gone through it carefully she says to herself—

"It's all right—Roland may see it with safety. It only proves that I *am* papa's daughter legally, and doesn't even hint at my being his heiress. I wonder if it will be very wicked of me to destroy the will?"

Her hand trembles as it closes over the official-looking document; but her purpose does not waver. This will, which is dated long after the one which has been acted upon by Sir Roland, gives The Lordship and the lands around it to Violet Byng, Sir Geoffrey's only child, legally born in wed-

lock. There are no conditions imposed upon this free legacy, but there is a wish expressed. It is to this effect, that Violet may unite the property to the title by a marriage with her cousin Roland.

The Lordship and all that appertains to it, especially the stud and the tan-gallop, are very dear to Violet Byng; but she makes up her mind to renounce them all rather than marry her cousin, or rob him of what he has been deeming his rightful inheritance for some time past.

"It *can't* be very wicked to destroy it," she argues, and she is glancing over it again, and debating the question very seriously with herself, when Mr. Masters comes in to have a look at the most interesting "case" that has ever illumined the path of his practice. In her confusion and uncertainty she lays bare before him her wishes and her fears, and Edward Masters feels an amount of unprofitable pain that humiliates him as he gives forth the fiat—

"You owe it in justice to yourself to let

your father's latest will be proved, and when that is done you will owe it in humanity to Sir Roland to restore to him by marriage that which you will have wrested from him by law."

CHAPTER IX.

“WHAT has caused the lion to lie down so quietly, and ‘raised the lamb,’ if I may be permitted to use the expression in this extraordinary way, Violet?” her cousin asks one day, when Violet has meekly surrendered her desire to ride at the behest of Mr. Masters.

“Is it very lamb-like to do as my doctor tells me while I am under his care?” she answers, striving to speak as if she did not feel Trixy’s eyes fixed penetratingly upon her.

“You’ll be freed from the restraint of his presence in a day or two. It must be time for him to go home to his practice,” Mrs. Beecher puts in, and the remark causes the

spirit of hospitality to rise rampant in Violet's breast. After all, *she* is the mistress of The Lordship! It is for her to speed the parting guest if he must go! She is on the point of giving vent to these sentiments, but a timely remembrance of the issue involved checks her.

"*You* don't think that it's time he went back to his practice—do you?" she says meekly to Beatrice, and Beatrice replies—

"No, I think he's better here; he's such a good dear fellow that I should always like him to be near to appeal to if I were in a bother."

There is something significant in Trixy's tone—something reassuring too, apparently. At any rate Violet takes heart of grace, and resolves to confide in, or at least to "consult," this pretty stranger whom she has hitherto regarded as Edward Masters's liege lady.

It is difficult to get hold of Trixy alone. one or other of the young men are perpetually intervening, but Mrs. Beecher is

very much at Violet's service suddenly, and so it chanced that the woman and the girl who have the same object in view, but are in ignorance of the fact, find themselves apart from the others one day with *nothing* between them and a perfect understanding save distrust! Mrs. Beecher has talked plausible generalities, and Violet has listened to the same, till each is sick of her *rôle*. Abruptly it comes into the mind of the younger and braver of the two that she will pass the shadowy barrier, no matter what is beyond.

"It's a settled thing that I am to be handed over to your care and to live with you as long as my guardian pleases—isn't it, Mrs. Beecher?"

"I believe it is, if there is nothing in the plan that is disagreeable to you," says Mrs. Beecher.

"There's a lot in it that's disagreeable to me," Violet says bluntly, "but that can be talked over by-and-bye.. I want to know now when Trixy is going to be married."

"She is not even engaged," Mrs. Beecher says coldly. "She gave a child's promise to a man——"

"And he will be man enough not to keep her to it if she wants to break it," Violet interrupts eagerly, and a new light dawns upon Mrs. Beecher.

"She gave a child's promise to a man she respected, Violet. May you never be tempted to do that before you meet the man you love," Mrs. Beecher says solemnly, and Violet rushes to a conclusion, and exclaims,

"Wouldn't *you* prefer him to the other, though? How *can* she weigh them in the balance and find him wanting? Which would you choose if you had your choice?"

"I have never thought of either of them in that light," Mrs. Beecher says rather tremulously, as she feels that she is sacrificing truth on the altar of matronly dignity.

"But if you were young?" Violet says guilelessly, and Mrs. Beecher hears the

genuine knell of her departed youth rung in those few words.

"If I were young again and foolish, as young people are apt to be about such matters, I think I should prefer the man who preferred *me* for myself, without regard to what I had, to the one whose interest was at stake—the one who would raise himself by a marriage," Mrs. Beecher observes, with a rasping note in her voice, as her soul is roughened by the reflection that Sir Roland is her daughter's disinterested adorer, while Edward Masters, the young struggling surgeon of Holton, is certainly open to having his motives for seeking any young lady of high degree regarded with suspicion.

"Well, *I am* young and foolish, and ask you to advise me now," Violet says hotly. "Shall I take the man who loves me best, regardless of all consequences? Shall I give up fortune and place, and a man who doesn't love me, for one who does?"

"I am afraid to say," Mrs. Beecher replies nervously, for she discerns a portion

of Violet's meaning and intention, though the causes which have developed these are still in deepest obscurity as far as her vision is concerned. "I am afraid to say. If you were my own child I would say marry the man you love."

"Then, why don't you tell Trixy to marry Edward Masters?"

Mrs. Beecher looks up in quick surprise at this familiar mention of Mr. Masters' name.

"Because she never loved him."

"Are you sure of that?" Violet asks eagerly.

"So sure of it, that I should positively bless any person or circumstance that came between them. Trixy never cared for him as a girl ought to care for the man she would marry; and he, if I'm not strangely mistaken, has now discovered that fact, and felt no pain in the discovery."

* * * *

"It is time that Trixy and I went on our way and settled in our new home, wherever

that is to be," Mrs. Beecher says to Sir Roland one morning as together they stand watching a group of three on the lawn.

"We have wearied you with the monotony of our home life," Sir Roland replies quickly. "It *has* been dull. I know that Violet's accident upset all our plans for your amusement; but now she's to the fore again we will entertain you better."

"Trixy and I have been here too long already Sir Roland," she says, speaking and looking at him so steadily that he flushes with half-unpleasant consciousness under her gaze. He has ceased from his "innocent gay fooling" with the pretty widow for some time past; but she has reason and right on her side in thinking that she has wasted sweeter interest upon him than he quite deserves. Accordingly her words ring rather reproachfully in his ears, and he is longing for the day to come when he may test her true womanliness by telling her of his tender loyalty to her daughter.

"I must have played my part as host

most awkwardly and ungraciously for you to say that," he says, in answer to her last words.

"You have played it both kindly and cleverly," she says, relieving him greatly by putting a few lightening touches into her manner; "but you know how we are situated. I made no concealment of the painful reverse which has befallen us to you, and you must understand that the sooner my girl and I get accustomed to our narrowed means the better for us both."

He inclines his head in assent to her proposition, galling as it is to him to hear such a one made about Trixy. Then he rushes upon his fate.

"Before you came here we spoke about Violet living with you. Will you take care of my cousin as you were willing to do of my ward?"

"I would take even greater care of her; but, Sir Roland, she will not need my protection long. And she is sweet and worthy

of you," she adds irrelevantly, with a little burst of uncontrollable emotion.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you. You think I shall marry my cousin?" he says gravely.

"I—we all think so."

"All! Does Trixy?"

"Trixy thinks it would be a very fitting and happy marriage—"

"As happy as her own with Masters would be," he interrupts impatiently. "Mrs. Beecher, you must see how it is with me. If it had been possible, if my heart had not revolted against my sense of justice towards my dear little cousin, I would have asked Violet to reign on here, the loved little queen of all, as my wife; but it is not possible. If I can win your daughter, I will win her. If she will have nothing to say to me, well, I shall bear my disappointment as it becomes a man to bear it, I hope but I shall not seek any other woman's love by false professions of my own."

Mrs. Beecher feels her heart beating

exultantly as she listens. Her child, her treasured Trixy, is worthy of the best of men and the brightest of positions, and both are offered to her now ! Then she remembers Edward Masters, his undeviating pertinacity, his undeniable claims, and her heart beats to another strain as she reflects on what will surely ensue if he refuses to give Trixy up. She dare not even promise this new suitor her maternal influence and support while that old suitor still reserves his rights ! She dare not wish this new love success until the old one has sent in his resignation ; for though Trixy is her own dear and dutiful daughter, Trixy has a clear knowledge of right and a strong sense of honour.

“ What if she has been guarding her heart, believing you to be attached to your cousin ? ” she asks.

“ That mistaken impression was swept away from her mind as soon as she came here and saw Violet and me together. I’m not afraid of her doubting me for a moment, but she may distrust herself. The shackles

of an old friendship are about her, and if he does not offer to break them, my fear is that she will fancy them binding."

"What are mother and you talking about? You're bobbing your heads up and down as if your subject was a will-o'-the-wisp, and would elude you if you didn't look after it sharply," Trixy interrupts, leaving the others at this juncture, much to the temporary pleasure of those others, be it told.

"We were speaking of our leaving," Mrs. Beecher says quietly.

"Our leaving, oh!" Trixy says hastily. "Yes, of course, the day must come for that among other things."

"And I was asking Sir Roland if he still wishes to place Violet with us for a time," Mrs. Beecher goes on speciously.

"I know Violet wishes to come," Trixy says thoughtfully. Then she turns her head aside and watches the pair she has left. Some tone borne on the breeze from one of them—some slight almost imperceptible gesture

—something indefinable in the atmosphere about them seems to give her pleasure, for she turns with a happy smile in her eyes towards Sir Roland.

“Violet never gave such an amount of attention to anything but a horse before as she’s bestowing on that flower Masters gave her just now,” Sir Roland laughs in response to that look, and Trixy knows that he feels as little pain in witnessing the spectacle of Violet’s absorbed attention, and fathoming the cause of it as she does herself.

Small wonder that Violet does listen with absorbed attention to the words Edward Masters is speaking to her. It is characteristic of the blunt honesty of the man that he will tell her all the story of his life-long affection for Trixy; of his tenacity in clinging to the engagement he had persuaded her to make with him, and of his self-reliant determination to love her and hold her through all time, before he speaks one word of love to Violet herself.

"I must tell you how unworthy I am of your confidence and regard. I must show you in the strongest light I can that I have been weak, self-confident, and more weakly unstable, Miss Byng," he says, by way of preface to his communication. And then he goes on and makes it fully.

"And having loved her like *that*, how can you turn to me?" she asks wonderingly, and he takes the flower he gave her awhile ago and the hand that holds it, back into his own keeping, as he replies,

"Because love loves love—she could never give me anything but the truest friendship—she never deceived me with professions—she never tried either to pique or please me—she was always the noblest, truest girl my imagination could conceive. But now that you have taught me what real love is, Violet, I feel what a coward I was to torture her by trying to force her into feigning it for me, and in striving to hold her to the promise I had led her to make."

"And how shall I meet her after this,

and tell her what you've told to me?" Violet asks smilingly, and her breath comes more freely when he answers,

"Why, of course, I've told her already. I couldn't have spoken to you as I have till Trixy knew about it and advised me."

So it comes about quite naturally and prettily presently that Violet plumes herself with exquisite delicacy and taste upon the power that is hers "under her father's will" of bestowing upon the man she loves the tangible means of conducing to his material happiness.

"If it hadn't come to this with us, I would have given it all without a word to my cousin Roland," she says vivaciously; "but, as it is, *you* must be master of The Lordship, and Roland shall have half the money."

"He must have *all*, my darling. The iron will eat into my soul, indeed, if I am laid open to the suspicion of having sought you for any consideration of place or property. He must have every jot and tittle of that which he has been so unjustly and so

long led to believe is his own. If you come to me at all, Violet, you must give up your dream of playing a magnanimous part and sharing your fortune with the cousin to whom you need not cede a sou. You must never let him know that he owes anything to your generosity if you mean really to be my wife."

"I really mean to be your wife," the girl says deprecatingly; "but it is a little hard that I am not allowed to make both of you prosperous. I shouldn't value 'all' without you, but with you I should value some of it."

"All or nothing," he told her it must be, and so (after the manner of women) she chose "nothing," and, after the manner of men, he could scarcely believe that there was much of a sacrifice in her election.

CHAPTER X.

"It isn't pleasant to be a baronet's wife on nothing a year, is it, dear?" Sir Roland Byng asks of his wife, some two years after all these events happened at The Lordship. And Trixy, who looks as if nothing unpleasant had happened to her in the interim, replies, as she holds her boy up in the air, in order that his crows may resound better—

"Well, there are better places than lodgings near Primrose Hill, Roland. Still, while you can write in them, and while the children seem pleased with the prospect from the window, I ought to be satisfied."

"I've heard from Violet to-day," he goes on hurriedly. "We've all been rather pig-headed, I'm beginning to think."

"I've thought it all along," Trixy says with calm triumph.

"Never mind what you thought," the adoring husband rejoins, with the marital impatience that is apparently so justifiable in men's eyes; "it has come to this now. Violet writes to tell me that she is going to be married."

"I *did* think she would have been faithful to Edward Masters," Trixy says, in the disgusted accents which are natural to a woman when she is censuring a sin of which she has been most unblushingly guilty herself.

"If you pity him at all it must be for getting her, not losing her," Sir Roland begins to explain; "and their marriage means an end to all this business for us, darling, for ever since the day I offered to bestow The Lordship upon her as some recompense for the injustice I believed her father had done her, and her indignant justification of that parent by brandishing his latest will in my face, a will which gave to her all I had been led to suppose I had

inherited legally, though unjustly, and which I as indignantly refused then to accept any portion of, our intercourse has been interrupted ; but now she has given The Lordship and all the property over which she has control to this little son of ours and to his heirs for ever, and if he dies—”

“ Oh ! he won’t die, my boy,” the mother cried out sharply. “ If *he* died what matter to any one what became of the property ? Tell me of my son’s fortune.”

And he told her ; but as she frequently interrupted him to ask if she had not said this and prophesied the other, and advised something else, perhaps the tale of Violet’s final victory can be told more briefly by her biographer.

For eighteen months after that explosion, in the course of which she vindicated her father’s memory from the charge of indifference to her interests as his daughter, and brandished the will before her cousin’s astonished eyes, Violet battled against all those who had forced her to proclaim her

power. Her friends—the Whites, among others, for Mr. White had witnessed the will—preached at and reproved her for the impatience which had brought to an unfortunate issue a set of circumstances which seemed to have been specially designed for her good.

Her one relation, hurt and wounded at her confidence having been withheld from him so long, only to be so rudely broken to him at last, estranged himself in apparent anger from her, and scoffed at the possibility of receiving compensation at her hands. Sir Roland, in truth, would take nothing from her. In a hazy kind of way it had always been in his mind to do something noble and generous towards her, and when Trixy captured his heart, he had, with a sigh of something like regret, resigned the idea of compensating Violet for everything by making her his wife. But now the positions were reversed, and she came with rich gifts to him; and she was the real lady of the land. So he went out from her vicinity,

determining to live someway, any way, but at least without *her* aid, who had helped to keep him in a pitiable false position. In vain Trixy, his wife, whom he married to his salvation in this hour of darkness, strove to teach him a nobler pride and a purer philosophy. He would gang his own gait, and the way was not one of pleasantness to him, nor of peace to Trixy.

But hardest of all for Violet to bear was the dogged determination of Mr. Masters to have nothing to do with her, or with the prosperity which had been forced upon her. He encased himself in the cast-iron armour of an independent spirit, which cannot brook being suspected of mercenary motives, and lowered his love to the dust.

For eighteen months Violet bore it all, and lived as if life at The Lordship were once more the bright and happy thing it had been to her of old. For eighteen months she went to her rest each night in hope, and awoke each morning to disappointment. She was longing for some of them—for all of

them—to come back and renounce the error of their respectively obstinate ways. Above all, she was longing to see Edward Masters again and to be ordered about by him in that dictatorial determined way which had been so delightful to her until it ran counter to her own will, and he never came.

“I wouldn’t demean myself by hankering after a man who wouldn’t have me if I were a queen upon the throne,” her friend Mary White says to her at times, and Violet listens tolerably to the folly, but derives no comfort from it. “It’s nasty low pride on his part,” Miss White goes on; “he couldn’t bear that people should naturally suppose he had an eye to the position and property as well as to you. I wish he had never come here, spoiling your life and Sir Roland’s.”

“Roland at least is happy,” Violet says a little enviously. “He has married the girl he loved, and everybody thinks him so noble for having renounced the whole property when he found he had no claim to it.”

"He's very poor, and he has to work hard to keep a wife and two children on about what he used to spend in cigars. Perhaps you call that happiness, but I don't, and he doesn't."

"He has a mother-in-law who can help him to any amount of magazine and press-work, and he has the pleasure of proving how immeasurably inferior I am to himself," Violet says proudly. "They have all been cruel and unjust to me! I would have made them all so happy if they would have let me; but Roland won't even take help from my hands, and Edward Masters will have nothing to say to me till Roland takes *everything* as well as help from me, and—"

"You have never tried persuasion with either of them, but have defied them as well as every one else; isn't that it, Violet? And you have bred colts, and flung away money on trainers, and made The Lordship a by-word in the county for gay goings on, in order to show them all how little you

care for them and their opinion ; isn't that it, Violet ?" Mary White asks rather nervously, for she dreads driving home the dagger that others and circumstances have planted in poor Violet's once light heart.

"Why shouldn't I waste my money ? No one wants either it or me," the heiress asks petulantly.

"And money is wanted so much by so many people," the other girl sighs.

"But not by any one I know," Violet half asserts, half questions.

"Sir Roland's son will be a baronet without a penny to keep his title up on ; Mr. Masters' scheme for cottage homes for convicts' children is failing for want of funds," Miss White observes.

"But neither Sir Roland nor Mr. Masters has asked for my aid, and if I offered it, one would lay an obligation upon me which the other would prevent me from fulfilling," Miss Byng says, angry tears springing to her eyes. "Sir Roland will not accept compensation on the one hand, and Mr.

Masters will not condescend to marry me till my cousin has been compensated. They are cruel, and they have made me callous. My colt will give me more gratitude and gratification than he will ever get from his convict children," she winds up scornfully ; but Miss White marks that she (Violet) is lending an attentive ear for more.

"Mr. Masters is a little stiff-necked, after the manner of poor proud honourable men who try to lead lives that are above suspicion, but you have been stiff-necked, too, Violet, and you are not happy here, dear, though you are very brilliant."

"Not happy !" Violet says bitterly. "Why I never *have time to think*, you dear old proser. If I had I might perhaps 'think' that they might be better with me. As it is, 'I'll care for nobody ; no, not I, and nobody'll care for me.' "

But despite this metrical resolve, the scheme with which Edward Masters has been striving to soothe a certain soreness of heart prospers greatly shortly afterwards.

And one day when he is gravely thanking the bright young lady who out of her stores is helping to redeem and provide for the castaways, she tells him of that interview with her cousin, in the course of which each had stung the other so sharply.

"And now he and his children and Trixy must hate us both, for it was at *your* request that I declared he should take 'all or nothing.' Isn't it horrible to be hated by our nearest and dearest?"

"Perhaps he would take *half* if you offered it to him now?" he says tremulously. The picture of Trixy and Trixy's children in want and hating him was too much for his endurance.

"Perhaps he would if you joined me in the request," she says with a happy blush, and his answer assures her that she has gained the victory, and that they may all be happy at last.

"It is only your husband who can join you in that request, my darling," he says, with such tender warmth that she is melted into surrendering another point.

"And though we shall be ever so rich, Edward, I'll never ask you to give up your practice."

Masterful to the last he accepts her concession blandly, and rejoins—

"But you must give up The Lordship; the house my wife inhabits must be made for her by myself. You may give it to Byng's boy."

So Trixy, to her mother's supreme satisfaction, reigns at The Lordship in right of her son, after all, and Violet lives in a solid, substantial, plain house, near enough to Holton for her husband to continue his practice. And no one ever clearly understands that she was ready from the first to resign her heiress-ship; but all, to her joy, glorify her husband, who is popularly supposed to have led her with much difficulty into the generously retributive path she pursues so sedately.

THE END.

A MISTAKE.

"SHE has the lightest foot, the lightest heart, and the lightest head in the county."

"You mean that her conscience is clear and her constitution sound? I like your description of her well."

"I mean—exactly what I said."

"My charge will be more than interesting, Mrs. Glynn."

"And you more than indiscreet in undertaking it so entirely. However, I have learned that what I am powerless to prevent, it is better to acquiesce quietly in. I have made my protest; you have not accepted it. I promise never to say another word on the subject."

The lady who had been addressed as Mrs. Glynn rose to leave the room; but at the door she paused and looked back to say,

"You shall see her alone—quite alone; and I need scarcely add that she shall not be influenced by my opinion. Do I not accept my powerless position gracefully?"

"As you would any that could possibly be yours to fill."

"Too polite to be perfectly truthful—too polite by many, many degrees," Mrs. Glynn said to herself as she closed the door and walked slowly upstairs on her way to look for her niece, and detail some important news to the latter.

While she is doing that, the man she had left, and his mission, shall be put before the reader.

It is a favourable moment for taking his portrait. He is looking more in earnest than he has looked for many a long day, as he sits in Mrs. Glynn's little morning-room, awaiting the advent of the girl who was

left to his guardianship ten years ago. Hitherto he has been lax enough in his charge, contenting himself with quarterly letters of inquiry as to her health, and with sending her gorgeous, useless presents from all corners of the globe. But now the conviction that everything else bores him strengthens his sense of duty towards his ward, and he has come down to see and claim her, as a preliminary step toward altering her life and his own.

So much, briefly, for his mission. The how and why such a one came to be in his course of duty will be explained as the narrative rolls on. Now a few words as to the man himself.

Young still—yet old enough ten years before this story opens to have been intrusted with the guardianship of a little girl by her father, an old brother officer dying in India—yearned over then by this young fellow, his friend—almost forgotten now in the anticipated advent of the girl he had left behind him.

Young still, and handsome—not with the godlike beauty that once adorned the pages of romance, and that rendered all things out of the regions of those pages tame and unprofitable, but handsome after the fashion of this age; alive and alert with intelligence and activity; well grown and erect, but neither lanky nor stiffly upright; free in gait, freer in gaze, freest of all in opinion and the outpouring of the same.

Graceful, gallant, and gay—so he had been, and so he had been reputed to be, for the last ten years. Well-favoured by nature, well thought of by men, well-liked by women, and well-placed in the world, he comes before you in the full flush of all these adventitious aids to favourable consideration awarded him. And if his chestnut hair turns to grey, or his eye's blue brightness gets dimmed before we have done with him, enough will remain to impress Frank Gambier as a true hero upon the minds of us all.

So much for him. Now for the girl over

whose actions and destinies, thoughts and feelings, he was to exercise a considerable influence.

Mrs. Glynn went thoughtfully to her niece's little sitting-room to make the announcement to the girl of her guardian's unexpected advent. The nominal mistress of the house knocked gently at the door that was closed upon the privacy of the one who was mistress of all things in reality at Langham Cottage; then admission was granted, and Mrs. Glynn went in—went in to a pretty, lightly, airily furnished room that was quite in keeping with the bright summer weather in which this story opens, and with the beauty of the girl who is to be its heroine. She looked up rather crossly at being disturbed; but when she saw by whom she was disturbed the cross expression vanished, and a smile came leaping up into her face.

"Dear aunt," she said, "what brings you to my lair at this time of day?"

"A matter of importance, Flo. Your

guardian has come to see you—perhaps to take you away.”

“What! the mythical Mr. Gambier!” Florence Bray cried, starting to her feet in an instant. “This, as Longfellow says, is better than all the poems that ever were said or sung. What is he like? How do I look?—fit to go down?”

“He is a striking-looking man—younger than I expected to see him.”

“Better and better still. The interest deepens. I’ll put on my new muslin.”

“My dear Florence, nothing can be nicer than that pretty print you have on.”

“Yes; the muslin is nicer,” Florence said, running away through another open door into her bedroom, where she paused for a minute to look at herself in the glass.

A glass could rarely have reflected a more exquisite figure or face. She was blonde, tall, and slight, with a tiny, handsomely poised little head, round which the golden hair was wrapped in a classical manner that was still fashionable. She had

violet eyes ; she had a proud, pale, fair face, in the which every feature was delicate, if not perfect. She had a splendidly rounded bust, full and firm, and a slight waist that did not look attenuated. She walked beautifully, putting each lovely little arched foot down with a degree of elastic firmness that few women can accomplish. She had slender, delicately shaped hands, on which no ring sparkled as yet, though she would much have liked to laden her pretty fingers with them. For Florence Bray was poor, and Mrs. Glynn had no jewelry to give her.

She was soon inducted into the new muslin, and then she went down, in her own pretty, half-stately, half-childish way, to meet the one who was supposed to have the authority of a father over her. There was nothing very paternal either in the words or the manner of his greeting, when he did come.

“Miss Bray, you have grown out of all knowledge !” he exclaimed, as she came up and swept him one of her grandest bows.

"And I never had any knowledge of you for you to have grown out of," she said, smiling; "so we meet as strangers, which is better than meeting as half-and-half acquaintances, I think."

"I think so too," he said, laughing. "Has Mrs. Glynn told you that at last I am come to take you in charge, as I promised your father faithfully I would do when you were grown up?"

"Do you mean that I am to live with you—to leave here?" she asked.

"Even so. Do you dislike the prospect?"

"I scarcely know what it is yet. Where am I to live? When am I to go? Who am I to live with?"

"You are to live with me at my house on the terrace at Richmond. You will leave your kind aunt at her and your earliest convenience."

"But a young girl like Florence can not live with you without a chaperon, Mr. Gambier," Mrs. Glynn said, blushing freshly.

"A widowed sister of mine keeps house for me," he replied. "Florence will be in all respects well cared for and protected from remark—believe that."

So it soon came to be settled, after a good deal of demur on one side and explanation on the other, that Florence Bray should start in a week for her new home with her guardian. And even during that week she began to weave the web of a romance.

"He is very attractive," she would say, suddenly; "very, very attractive, old as he must be." A man of thirty is old in the estimation of many girls of seventeen, especially when he stands to her in the legal relation in which Frank Gambier stood to Florence Bray.

She reached the new home on the terrace at Richmond at the close of a fair summer day, a day that had been alternately excitingly sad and exquisitely pleasant. The parting with her aunt had been very trying to both of them. But still there was the promise of a speedy reunion, when Mrs.

Glynn should come up to visit Flo in her new home. But, on the other hand, the journey had been agreeable, for Mr. Gambier caused his ward to travel as she had never travelled before. He secured a first-class carriage for himself and her. He gave her a new travelling-bag, daintily fitted with all manner of refreshing essences and perfumes. He had stocked a luncheon-basket with delicate viands and delicious bottles of Rhine wine; so that she was not condemned to the coarse, unappetising railway-station fare.

In truth, the day had been excitingly sad and exquisitely pleasant in brief alternate paroxysms. Aunt Ellen, as Florence always called Mrs. Glynn, had, by her doleful manner of taking leave of the girl, made the early hours oppressive. But the travelling-bag and the luncheon-basket were full of refreshments; and more refreshing than either to the young, ardent girl, who had been so quietly and demurely brought up, was the conversation and companionship of Frank Gambier.

Their reception at the house on Richmond Terrace was eminently satisfactory and pleasant. The widowed sister, Mrs. Burser, was an elderly woman, twenty-five or thirty years older than her brother Frank. But in spite of what appeared her vast antiquity in Florence's eyes, Mrs. Burser developed a marvellously young sympathy for Florence. By which statement I do not for one instant mean to imply that Mrs. Burser affected juvenility in any way ; but she developed a heart, or rather soul sympathy for a young girl's tastes and likings. She had made the good old, well-built, rather dark house bright and fair with flowers. They bloomed in big pots on the door-step, in big vases in the dining and drawing-rooms, in big bouquets (rather too tightly packed together these last) in Florence's bedroom. "Coming from the country as you do, my dear, I thought that flowers would speak to you at once as old friends," she said kindly, to the strange young girl who was thus suddenly brought into her quiet life by her erratic brother,

Mr. Gambier. And Florence accepted the floral sympathy and the good intention with cordial graciousness, and somehow or other felt disappointed that the flowers had not been Mr. Gambier's thought instead of his sister's.

In a very little time Florence was quite one of them. Indeed, from the first Mr. Gambier treated her rather as a young sister than a guest or stranger. He catered well for her amusement, giving her a horse to ride and a pony-carriage to drive. He took her to operas and theatres and concerts—his sister always accompanying them as chaperon. But he did not devote much time to her exclusively in the day, and Florence soon learned to pout about this unalterable fact.

“You have no hateful official duties and no abominable business cares to take you to town every morning,” she would plead, prettily, when his handsome cob was led round every morning at half-past eleven. “Why should you go up with such mercantile regularity?”

"I am going to do my duty towards my fellow-creatures in the Row, my dear child," he would say laughingly.

"Why don't you let me go up on the *Morning Star*, and do my duty to my fellow-creatures by showing myself with you?"

"Because I think country air better for you when you ride; because you are too beautiful to be seen there with a groom alone," he said gravely.

"I asked why I couldn't 'go with you,'" she said, lifting her fair head with a little haughty air of interrogation.

"Because you are too beautiful to ride there with any man save your husband, and that—"

He paused abruptly, and a scarlet flush came over his handsome face,

"*And that*'—what?"—she asked. "And '*that*' I haven't got, I suppose you mean. Well, I would rather ride there with you than with any husband that could be found for me in the world."

"Florence, don't tempt me," he whis-

pered ; " My own darling, it would not be well for you, and I will do nothing that is not well for you. When I am your escort, my sister must be with us, or Mrs. Grundy will be outraged."

" My own darling !" How often Florence repeated those words, feeding on them, growing glad in her heart about them, hoping that they meant that she was his " own darling " indeed ! She had been an inmate of his house, the object of his care and attention, for six weeks now, and during those six weeks she had come to feel that he was dearer to her than anything on earth. To herself she called those seventeen years of existence which she had passed before he came to claim her a dreamless sleep, such as the lady slept in the enchanted palace ; and Frank Gambier was the " happy prince with joyful eyes " who had come to wake her from it. " Would he had done it with a kiss !" she cried, in her passion for him ; and then a throb of gratitude quickened her pulses for that he had not married before

he came home and found her "beautiful exceedingly."

As for Mr. Gambier, he felt that it would have been well, both for him and for her, if he had been chained from all thoughts of love for her by the clogging memories of a hundred wives.

One special day he had been peculiarly oppressed with this feeling. There was to be a large party at the house of a Mrs. Thornton, a great friend of his, whom Florence had not seen yet, and who lived in Belgrave Square. Mrs. Thornton's name had been mentioned frequently since the receipt of the invitation; but Florence, partly from indifference on her own part, and partly from reticence on the part of those she questioned, had failed to gather other particulars about her than these, namely, that she was a widow, and that she lived in Belgrave Square.

It was to be a very grand party—not a ball, but a dance on a colossal scale, and several notabilities of the season were to grace it with their presence. Her guardian had

had given Florence *carte blanche* to get what dress she pleased ; and Florence was alone with him in the evening before starting, showing him the result and the effect of his generosity. It was a lovely cloudy dress of white tulle over crystalline white silk, that in which Miss Bray was to make her *début*. And round her throat she wore a single string of fine pearls with a diamond clasp that had been her mother's, and on her head and in her bosom she had a pretty little arrangement of starry myrtle blossoms gleaming out from amidst their shining green leaves.

Well, altogether, Miss Bray's appearance may confidently be stated to have been a success on this night. Perhaps she felt it to be so herself. Perhaps he felt it to be so. At any rate, both of them were steeped in silence as he stood surveying her.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked impatiently. She could not bear that he should not admire, should not love her. She could not patiently wait for the good

time coming, in which he would surely openly tell her that he did these things. The chief fear she had in her mind now was that Mrs. Burser would come in, and so delay the telling.

"I am thinking of you, Flo," he said.

"Nice things? pretty things that I should like you to think?" she asked coaxingly.

"I am thinking that to-night you will surely be some man's fate; some man will see you, and, seeing you, will find every other woman dim in comparison with you."

"That's just what I want you to think," she said, with that seductive mixture of shyness and candour that had made her so irresistible to him; and as she spoke she held out her bouquet toward him, requesting him to remark its perfect arrangement.

"As you are neither a bride nor betrothed, why so much myrtle?" he asked.

"Because it's the loveliest flower that grows; and why shouldn't I wear it?"

"It's the German bridal flower. As I said just now, you, being neither a bride nor

betrothed, have not established a claim to wear it yet."

"But as I am not a German, and as I like it, and as, for all any one knows to the contrary, I may be a betrothed, I shall wear my myrtle to-night, Mr. Gambier," she said laughing, with a pretty consciousness that made his heart beat faster.

"Florence, you don't mean that you have kept any love affair—any entanglement—from me, do you?" he asked in a low voice.

"I have kept nothing from you," she said, blushing brightly. "I should be a wretch to keep anything from you. Any love affair, indeed! Why, until I saw you I never saw a man that I could—"

She stopped, embarrassed, as Mrs. Burser entered the room. And, considering what was to come, Mr. Gambier could but thank the kind Providence that had arrested any further revelation of her feelings.

She did love him! Over and over again during the course of that drive up to the

grand gathering in Belgrave Square, Florence told herself that she did love her guardian, and that her guardian did love her. She had never been sure of this latter fact until to-night, though she had frequently suspected it. But now suspicion was set at rest, and she was sure. Why otherwise should he have been so affected when she made that idle speech relative to no one knowing whether or not she was a betrothed? "He must love me," she said to herself, in a happy burst of confidence; "and he will soon tell me so. Perhaps he will even tell me to-night."

Even while she was thinking this, Mr. Gambier was striving to arrange a form of words in which to make to her a widely different disclosure.

They were among the rather late arrivals, and dancing was in full possession when they went in. Their hostess was in a comparatively accessible spot, and as they paused to speak to her Florence was struck with her great air of familiarity with Mr. Gambier.

"My dear Frank," the lady of the house said, "you will have some difficulty in making your peace, I'm afraid, for being so late."

"I hope not," he said hurriedly. Then he added, "Let me make known my old friend's daughter, my ward, Miss Bray, to you."

"So!" Mrs. Thornton said, with an air of surprise. "This is the young girl you have spoken about. I fancied her a child, from what you said." Then she held out her hand to Florence, and Florence barely touched the extended fingers, but lifted her beautiful young head up proudly and glanced unmistakable dislike and defiance at the cool handsome matron.

"I must find you a partner—not that I shall have much difficulty," that lady said, smiling unconcernedly; and as she spoke she tapped a young man who stood near her on the arm with her fan; and presently Florence was being whirled round the room in a rapid waltz.

"And now you really had better find out Blanche, and make your peace with her," Mrs. Thornton said to Frank Gambier; and he turned slowly away, in obedience to her behest, with a heavy step and a heavier heart.

"Supposing she should hear from some of them to-night before I have time to tell her," he thought miserably. And then he cursed that habit of procrastination which had made him delay the announcement of his engagement to Miss Blanche Thornton.

There was not much time given him for reflection. Presently he came upon the object of his quest. She was standing in the midst of a small and evidently admiring group. And she was very beautiful, and she did not look either aggrieved or angry. There was balm in Gilead for him still, he felt; he could ill have borne just now to be rebuked or made to feel guilty.

"Richmond is such a dreadful distance that of course you are late," she said, smiling, when he commenced making apologies.

"Is your sister here, and your ward? I hope you have brought her."

"Yes, she is here," he said with some constraint.

"An acquaintance of her aunt's, Mrs. Glynn, happens to be here to-night; and he has been giving me a glowing account of her. Frank, you never told me what a beauty you kept caged up in your old house on the terrace. How do you like my dress?"

She was a grand-looking, hazel-eyed, brown-haired woman of five or six-and-twenty. Her rich, sheeny, white satin robe became her well, and he told her so.

"And how do you like my flowers?" she asked.

"Myrtle is always lovely," he said evasively.

"I wear it in right of my position," she said, laughing. "As I am to be married so soon I may wear the bride's flower. A turn? Oh, yes, if you like;" and she put her hand on his shoulder as he slipped his arm round

her waist, and together they glided into the thickest circle of the dancers.

They were in full swing in the midst of the crowd (both were faultless steppers, and he was an unerring guide) when Florence caught sight of them.

"Who is that handsome woman dancing with Mr. Gambier?" she asked.

"The lady who will soon be Mrs. Gambier," her partner answered, glancing at the pair she mentioned.

Florence stopped suddenly in her career as though she had been stung.

"Do you mean that they are to marry?" she asked, with a pitiful pallor creeping over her sweet young face.

"I believe that they mean it. Shall we go on?" her partner said. And then they swung round lightly just in the wake of Miss Thornton and her lover, and Flo's heart was nearly bursting.

She took in every line, every shade, every attribute and detail of her rival's beauty—even down to those suggestive adjuncts of

it, the myrtle blossoms. And when she had done this, she got herself away to a pink cambric and white muslin bower, that was used as a dressing-room this night, and denuded herself of wreath and bouquet. "He said I had no right to wear the myrtle," she thought, almost choking with her wounded love and pride as she thought it; "and he seemed to be so sorry when he fancied I meant that I was betrothed to somebody else." Then she substituted some crimson roses which she found in a glass on the dressing-room table; and with these in her hair and bosom she went back to the ball-room.

Soon he came to her, though he dreaded coming to her now; and by the time he came there were crimson roses blooming in her cheeks too; for the girl was almost mad with the intense feeling she had about her love and her disappointment.

"How quickly you have changed your colours!" he said, in some surprise, as he came up and sat down close to her.

"It is so easy to change," she said recklessly. "I have found that out this evening."

"What do you mean?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh! I mean that one can change one's character and costume, one's feelings and flowers, all in a minute if one only tries," she replied, trying to lift her eyes to his face, and failing in the attempt.

"Have you changed your feelings as well as your flowers, Florence?" he asked gravely.

"I think I have—I hope I have." Her eyes were raised to his for an instant now, with a world of passionate reproach in them.

"My dear child! what has come over you?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, slowly; then she added stormily, "yes, I do know; I have found out that you haven't been trusting me."

"Florence, I have trusted you with every

thing," he said—with more than you know—with more than I dare tell you of."

"You are going to be married, and you never told me; you let me come here to see her, and you never told; you let me——"

"Florence," he whispered in an agony as she paused in her plaint, "I was a coward—but you will forgive me. But how do you know this? who has told you? I meant to tell you myself to-night."

She shuddered visibly. "Then it is true—it is all true?" she asked. "Never mind who told me—is it *true*?"

"It is."

"I think I had better dance again," she said wearily. "I think if I can dance away thought I shall be better."

He looked at her with a world of love and pity in his eyes, and as he looked he remembered her aunt's words about her on that day when he went down to wrest her from that simple country life in which she was so happy. Those words rang in his

ears now. "She has the lightest foot, the lightest head, and the lightest heart in the county." And as he remembered them his own heart collapsed with a self-reproachful pang.

But what could he do now? His own bride-elect came sauntering by, and stopped demanding an introduction to Miss Bray; and he had to go through the form, and see Florence patronized, half superciliously, and know that her heart was breaking nearly, and still he had to be quiet, and dared not betray his real feelings.

"Will she live with us when we are married?" Miss Thornton asked, late in the evening.

"I don't know; there will be a difficulty. She is a sacred charge. I dare not hand her over to any one else."

"She may be a sacred charge to you; but she will be a most awful and unmitigated bore to me if she lives with us," Blanche said poutingly. "I shall try and secure a good *parti* for her as soon as I have re-

sources of my own at command, quite as much for my own sake as hers. She may conceive a *grande passion* for you if she is not given something to divert her."

"I detest jokes of that kind," he said gravely; and Miss Thornton, as he spoke, contracted her lids over her hazel eyes and looked at him observantly.

About the same time this conversation was being carried on between the engaged pair, Florence, standing near to Mrs. Thornton, heard that lady say,

"Yes; the marriage is definitely fixed for the 28th of August.

"And will they live at Richmond?" the lady to whom she was talking asked.

"Well, no; I think not. Blanche would find it out of the way. But Mr. Gambier is attached to the old house because it was his mother's; so I suppose he will keep it on as a home for his sister and his ward."

"I will not be disposed of in that way by that woman and her daughter," Florence thought indignantly. "He was all mine

till to-night—at least I thought so—and I can't banish that thought all in an hour. They shall not settle where I live and how I live."

Her wrath had not cooled down when she got into the carriage to go home. She was agitated, excited, flushed and unhappy.

"How have you enjoyed your first ball, my dear?" Mrs. Burser asked, in unconscious kindness; and Florence answered stormily,

"I have hated it."

Even as she spoke she felt her hand taken and pressed with a sympathy that she knew could never have been evoked from Mrs. Burser. She snatched her hand away in sudden wrath. What right had he to express sympathy for her now? Was he not going to marry Miss Thornton—"Blanche" (she said the pretty name to herself with withering scorn)? Ay, then, but what right had she (Florence) ever had to his sympathy what she did not still retain? He was the same. The circumstances under which she

had come to him were the same, apparently. He was her guardian still. Only to herself dared she confess that she had felt, that she did feel more warmly than was well in only a ward.

“Dear me ! I thought it was all so pretty that you would be sure to have enjoyed it,” Mrs. Burser said prosaically, cutting into the midst of these meditations. “You danced as much as you wished, didn’t you, dear ?”

“Yes, I danced as much as I wished,” Florence said, laconically ; and then there was silence between them all until they reached home.

When they did reach home Florence was left alone with Mr. Gambier for a minute or two. It was a fixed rule with Mrs. Burser to go round and see that every door and window was well fastened up before she retired to rest herself or permitted other people to do so. “Wait a moment here, dear, till I see if all is right in the bedrooms,” she said to Florence this night, as they turned into the dimly-lighted drawing-

room. And Florence assented wearily, and sat down on the sofa, and waited until moments grew into minutes.

For an instant or two she silently laboured under the conviction that he was watching her. Then she broke the spell, and spoke impetuously,

"Mr. Gambier, will you let me go back to my aunt to-morrow, please?"

"Florence, Florence!" he said pleadingly, "you do not mean what you say."

"Yes, I do mean it," she retorted quickly. "I mean it thoroughly, honestly. I came here to live with you; I don't want to be left with Mrs. Burser."

"What makes you think you will be left with Mrs. Burser?" he asked.

"I know it. I heard——" Then she stopped herself, for Mrs. Burser had come back from her tour of inspection, and Florence had no desire to pursue the conversation before her.

"I will see you to-morrow morning," he said, as he rose up to bid her good-night;

and she went to bed to think, through the long hours that were left of darkness, of that coming interview, and of what might come of it.

Poor Florence ! She may be blamed by the rigid for having given her love unsought. But when a man makes himself specially delightful to a girl, how in the world is she to know whether he is seeking her or not ? And while she is asking herself the question and debating about it, she falls in love with him ; and thus, if mischief comes of it, she has to bear the brunt of the misery the mischief brings—that is all.

No hour had been named for their meeting the following morning ; but about eleven o'clock they found themselves alone, and free to enter upon their unpleasant explanations to each other unfettered by Mrs. Burser's presence.

“What did you mean last night by saying that you would go back to your aunt ?” he asked gently ; and she answered quickly,

“Exactly what I said. I do want to go back.”

"But why, Florence?"

"Because it's all a mistake my being here."

"How is it a mistake?" he said, colouring.

"How? Do you want me to tell you that when you are married my home could not be with you? I heard Mrs. Thornton arrange it all for you last night," she continued, with a bitter sneer, that was caused by the pain that was gnawing at her young heart.

"What did you hear Mrs. Thornton arrange for me?" he asked in a low voice.

"Everything. When you were to be married—the 28th of August, she said—and where I was to live. This house is too much out of the way for her daughter, but it is to be my home, according to Mrs. Thornton; and according to her I am sure I am to be nothing to you; and I *won't* be that; I can't be that; I had rather go away, quite away from you."

She bent her head down, and sobbed in

the utter, entire abandonment of her grief ; and he went up and stood close to her, but neither dared touch the tear-stained face nor the little trembling hands.

“My own Florence ! my treasured trust ! my loved charge ! you shall never leave me, if you will stay with me !”

“If I will stay ? What do you mean ? Your wife would not have me.”

“I have no wife—yet,” he said intemperately. “I was pursued by both mother and daughter—flattered, followed, made one of them whether I would or not, before I went to fetch you away from your aunt. It was all a mistake, my darling. You have my love.”

“But she has your pledge,” Florence said, rising up proudly. “No, no, no,” she continued, as he took her hand and tried to kiss it ; “don’t let us make a further mistake now. You are hers ; and I will go home and try to forget that I have made such an egregious one.”

“You will not forgive me ?” he murmured.

"Yes, I will," she answered, with a sob in her voice. "I have forgiven you; but I couldn't bear to stay here, and know that it was all folly, and that the time was soon coming when you would leave me to be nothing to you."

She won by her appeal. She went home the next day, and was rapturously received by her aunt, who arrived by her unaided instincts at something like the truth of the story. But the old home seemed such a desolate place to her after the love-lighted one she had left at Richmond.

About two months after her return Mr. Gambier called on Mrs. Glynn again. "We thought you were on your wedding tour," that lady said when she had greeted him. And then he told her that Blanche Thornton, by an opportune display of temper, had enabled him to break the chain which bound him to her, and away from Florence.

To the latter he went more into details, but this was briefly the state of the case:

He clung to the thought of a residence in

man; and not only a wealthy man, but a hospitably-minded man, who kept what is technically termed "open house;" that is to say, he made welcome and entertained all comers who were known to him or neighbours to him.

I was the eldest daughter, and, by right of seniority, was very much in the confidence of my father and the company of my mother. It is not too much to say that they both idolised me; and their pride in me was so perfect and so pure, that the memory of it has been my safeguard through many years of trial.

It was tacitly understood, out of the family as well as in it, that "pretty Maude Chichester," as I was called, was expected to marry well. I myself had visions, more or less misty, of some one who had not appeared yet, who should unite in his own person the charms of both Adonis and Cræsus—be, in fact, a sort of Admirable Crichton, with all the modern improvements.

My home was so happy, and I was so happy in it, that it was with a feeling of dissatisfaction almost that I learned that I was asked to go and spend a month of the season with Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay, an old friend of my father's, who had visited us once when I was a child, and then had disappeared from our midst as utterly as if she never had been. I remembered her, when this invitation came to me, as a slight, graceful, fascinating woman, with no great beauty of person, but gifted with an elegance of manner that was bewildering, and with a subtle power of pleasing that amounted to genius. I remembered, too, that my mother had not appreciated these gifts; and somehow or other, much as I liked gaiety, I disliked the idea of going to stay with Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay.

I spoke to my mother about this unwillingness, and she laughed at me.

"You dear, silly child," she said, "go for my sake. I shall feel very proud for Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay, who always looked

upon me as a nonentity, to see my daughter. Besides, Maude, we want you to see society and to be seen by it, and Mrs. Ramsay will introduce you well."

My younger sisters envied me hugely and openly when they saw the wardrobe that was prepared for my visit. It is one thing to be considered well dressed in the country, and another to be considered well dressed in town, and my mother fully recognised the distinction. I had some dresses from Paris, and these served as models for others to be made by; and so, altogether, I went out well prepared with the munitions of woman's warfare.

My father took me up to town, and on our way he gave me a slight sketch of Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay.

"We were both young when I knew her first," he said, "and she was just married to Ramsay, who's an excellent fellow, and was enormously rich at the time. Since then they have had reverses, but I suppose he's all right again now."

"Got another fortune, do you mean, papa?" I asked wonderingly.

"He has had several fortunes, and lost them on the Stock Exchange; but I hope that he has secured something now. She isn't a woman to endure poverty in her old age."

"She's very nice, isn't she?" I asked dubiously.

"She's bewitching," my father said earnestly. "But—" then he hesitated slightly, and at last added—"she isn't quite what your mother calls trustworthy. I promised I would tell you this, and now I have told you; but you mustn't let it prejudice you against her. Her temperament is a variable one, and it makes her act and speak inconsistently sometimes. She's the offspring of two brilliant nationalities—of an Irish father and a French mother. I'm very much mistaken if you are not devoted to her before you have been with her a week."

"Mamma wasn't devoted to her, was she?" I asked.

My father laughed.

"Your mother thought her a humbug, my dear, but that won't prevent your finding her uncommonly agreeable," he said; and I made up my mind that I would not be led away into liking an untrustworthy woman, however agreeable she might be.

My intentions were built upon the sand. I had not been an hour in Mrs. Ramsay's atmosphere before they crumbled away into nothingness. I can recall her vividly as I saw her first, and experience again the same sensations of gratified taste and perplexed admiration with which she filled me then.

We had been ushered through a shady fern-adorned hall, up a staircase that had brackets at every third step supporting pots of richly-coloured flowers, along a sumptuously carpeted little corridor, and finally into the sanctuary and presence of the mistress of the mansion.

"Show me a woman's favourite resort,

and I will tell you what she is," is a sentiment that is frequently uttered. But Mrs. Ramsay's "favourite resort" was apt to confuse one's judgment respecting her and her tastes.

It was a long, lofty room, the ceiling painted with a mass of pale blue clouds, that merged into rosy Loves and Venuses in the centre. There were three windows on one side of the room, and these were draped with splendid Oriental stuffs and filmy white muslin. Between each window a cabinet stood; and on one of these a cross was placed, and on the other a good copy in marble of the Venus de' Medici. In each window there was a jardinière; rare exotics filled two of them, and the third was filled with growing primroses. The wide velvet-covered mantelpiece supported Dresden jars, bronzes, Rose du Barri cups and saucers, scent-bottles, old German and Venetian glass, rosaries, Oxford frames with photographs of saints, ormolu frames with photographs of opera queens, flowers, a

Rimmel's vaporiser, and a little incense-burner. Scattered about the room were *prie-dieu* chairs, nests of ottomans, fat luxurious arm-chairs, couches of every imaginable shape, and swarms of spidery-legged tables covered with books. All sorts of incongruous books were there littered about in fascinating confusion. French novels and German studies in metaphysics, volumes of the old English dramatists, Heine's poems, and lectures by Newman and Liddon.

At the end of the room, in the deep recesses of one of the fattest of the chairs, the mistress of all these things sat: a tall, slight, fair woman, of about fifty, with a pale face, that would have been plain had it not been so animated and eager. At the very first glance I acknowledged her to be picturesque, peculiar, charming.

She was dressed in a loose violet silk garment, that fell unconfined from her shoulders, and draped her as classically as ever Greek art draped marble. About her head and neck there was a good deal of old

cream-coloured rich lace, and her fingers were heavily jewelled. "She can't walk about in the streets in that thing," was my first thought, as she rose up in her graceful height, and I saw that the violet silk still lay in sheeny, lustrous billows on the floor. She welcomed my father as an old and valued friend. One would have thought to hear her that he had been greatly in her thoughts since they had last met, whereas a closer knowledge of her character revealed to me the fact that she had never given one to him. And when she had said her rapid, prettily pronounced, forcible, and effective welcome to him, she turned to me.

I can't remember all she said now; and if I did remember it, my story would not be materially bettered by the repetition. All I do remember is that she made me feel very much pleased with myself, and with the prospect of her companionship for a time.

I soon found that the society into which she plunged me was as varied, attractive,

dazzling, and mixed as were the adornments of her room. One day she would be making offers, that no one thought of accepting, of selling all her ornaments and personal trinkets, and giving the proceeds to the chapel of a sisterhood. The next day she would be calculating in what way she could most easily economise, in order that she might become possessed of a ruby bracelet or a diamond ring. One week politics would claim all her heart, all her soul, all her thoughts. The next, a new theatrical star would banish the memory of every other interest. And suddenly the theatrical star would sink into insignificance before the rising light of a spirit-rapping charlatan.

She was as changeable as a chameleon, as versatile as Queen Titania's darling Puck, as fickle as a Parisian mob. But she possessed in the highest degree woman's royal grace of charming. Her enthusiasms were infectious, though you knew them to be false. Her flatteries were elating, though you knew them to be fulsome. Her atten-

tions were gratifying, though you knew them to be feigned. Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay was, on the whole, as delightful and as dangerous a chaperon as a young girl could have.

Her "admirably disordered" drawing-room was the trysting-place of a number of fashionable ladies and of semi-professional young men. Rising violinists, budding artists, popular young actors, flocked to Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay's house to champagne luncheons, and kettledrums, and delicious little "five-o'clock dinners," that were arranged to exactly suit the exigences of play-going. Small wonder that these young men, many of whom were without a "local habitation and a name" as yet, were very much at the feet of the lady who catered so liberally for their creature comforts.

The brightest star of this galaxy of talent was a Mr. Harold Temple, a gentleman who had taken to painting, not only because he wanted to make money by it, but because he loved it, and believed in it, and did it

well, as only those who do love it and believe in it can. He was a clever artist, and a polished man of the world; and Mrs. Kenneth Ramsay, among others, made much of him, and prognosticated great things of him.

I think that I was attracted toward him first, not by his great personal beauty, nor by his polished address, nor by his great talent, but by his supreme ambition. It was such a new thing to me to hear burning talk of a career. He used to come and sit for an hour or two in Mrs. Ramsay's drawing-room late at night, after he had been to dinners or to the opera (for he was a privileged person, and she suffered him to drop in at any hour, however untoward it might be), and talk excitedly of the vast room that there was for improvement in all the schools of art, and plan out possibilities of inaugurating a purer era.

Nor did he talk only. He was an earnest-minded, hard-working student, and he constantly brought us "studies" of some

portions of the great pictures he was painting, and discussed them with us, until I began to patter the professional jargon quite freely. And on several occasions Mrs. Ramsay took me to his studio, where I saw him at his best—a genuine art-enthusiast, a successful man unspoiled by success, with every picturesque effect about him heightened by his accessories.

I have said that ten years ago I was a handsome girl; and he, at least, seemed to think so. He made me his model for countless Guineveres and Christabels and Mary Stuarts. And at last, one never-to-be-forgotten day, he threw his pencil aside, and came over to me, and clasped my hands in his, and pressed his lips on my brow, and told me that he loved me—loved me, and was ready to fight a hard fight to win me!

For an hour or two I was in a more perfect paradise than I had ever imagined, or can ever know again. For an hour or two I believed that Love would be lord of all, and would conquer the difficulties

which, girl as I was, I foresaw were in my path. Ah me! the difficulties that I did *not* foresee were the ones that gave me my fall.

I leaped at once from girlhood and its delicious sense of irresponsibility into womanhood during those happy hours. Harold took me into his confidence at once, told me of his plans, his hopes and aspirations, and laid well and clearly before me his probabilities of success.

"I am a loyal servant to my art now. I must master it in time," he said to me; "and when I have mastered it your friends will leave off rallying you for having preferred me to one of the fine gentlemen with large estates who are favoured by your father; but in the interim you must make up your mind to be looked upon as a little in the shade."

"What do you mean?" I asked wonderingly. "There are no gentlemen, fine or otherwise, who are favoured by my father, or who favour me."

"Are there not?" he said, laughing. "Then our well-beloved Mrs. Ramsay has been painting the lily with a vengeance. Mind you select a happy moment for telling her of this little affair, or she will be unpleasant."

"No, she won't; she's so fond of you," I interrupted.

"I know that," he said drily; "but she likes to play the part of Providence to her favourites, and she hadn't ordained this finale, I assure you;" and then he laughed again, and said he would like to see her face when I told her.

Before he left me that morning he had put our engagement ring on my finger. It was not the usual brilliant badge which is generally given on such occasions, but what I valued and admired much more—a large carved turquoise, a genuine antique, and a very beautiful one. I had often noticed it on Harold's finger, and I knew that my secret would soon cease to be one, as

Mrs. Ramsay could not fail to mark it on mine.

For a time after my lover left me I sat in a happy day-dream. He was a god of power and intellect, of genius and beauty, to me, and my heart throbbed with gratitude that he had chosen me, and with pride as I pictured the way in which I should introduce him to my family. Presently my day-dream was dispelled by Mrs. Ramsay sweeping in with a little repressed air of displeasure. She was always a late riser, and this was her first appearance for the morning. "My dear Maude," she began, with the peculiar bell-like inflections in her voice which I had already learned to dread, "don't you think that you are a little imprudent? Hatcher tells me Harold Temple has been here again, and you received him."

"Of course I did," I blurted out, rather vehemently. "He came on purpose to sketch me in his 'Dream of Fair Women.'" Her eyes were on the ring, I saw, and so I

hastened to add, "And before he went he asked me to be his wife, and I promised to be."

"Of course he did," she said, with such extraordinary calmness that I almost hated her. "You're just the sort of girl whom Harold Temple always does ask to be his wife."

"*Always does ask?*"

"Yes; you were not so terribly foolish as to take him to be in earnest, I hope?" she said scoffingly; and I gave a great moan, and almost fell upon my knees, as I implored her to say that she was "not in earnest now."

Her slender hand came out from the lustrous silken sleeve, and laid itself upon my burning forehead. Involuntarily I shrank from it, and she drew it back in anger.

"Maude," she said, with dignity, "your infatuation is making you act absurdly; you have not taken the young man's ring, surely?"

"Surely I have," I said, passionately.

"Such conduct in my house!" she said, apostrophising the ceiling. "Commend me to country-bred girls for audacity, and that fastness which is the bane of modern society. Harold Temple is known to be involved in a difficulty that puts marriage out of the question. I shall write and tell him that I have told you this; it is my duty, as your temporary guardian, to tell you this, and save you trouble."

"Save me trouble! You are breaking my heart," I muttered.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Pray don't treat me to histrionics, Maude; I am in no mood for them to-day. I am too much annoyed with the way Harold Temple has abused my confidence; he gave me his promise that nothing of this sort should occur with any girl under my protection."

I could bear it no longer. He was in the habit, then, of winning other girls' hearts as he had won mine.

"Why did you let me—let me—"

"Let you love him, my dear? It never occurred to me that you would, on such slight provocation," she said coldly. And then I dragged the ring off my finger, and cried,

"Send it back to him!"

"For your own dignity's sake send a line with it," she said. And I wrote,

"Mrs. Ramsay has enlightened me respecting you. I return your ring, and bid you farewell.

"MAUDE CHICHESTER."

She made it up daintily in an envelope, directed and sent it to him; and then she counselled that I "should go home."

END OF VOL. II.







